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Defining reality: The poverty and welfare rhetoric of Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan

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DEFINING REALITY: THE POVERTY AND WELFARE RHETORIC
OF LYNDON JOHNSON AND RONALD REAGAN

by

Andrea Lyn Finan
Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Communication Studies
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OF LYNDON JOHNSON AND RONALD REAGAN

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ABSTRACT

Defining Reality: The Poverty and Welfare Rhetoric of Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan

by

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This project examines the centrality of rhetorical definition in case studies of public argument over U.S. policy on poverty and welfare in the twentieth century. The starting point is research on presidential rhetoric, wherein one line of inquiry entails the exploration of the "bully pulpit" as an advantage to chief executives seeking to construct perceptions of social reality. Such construction frequently establishes the foundation of an incumbent's persuasive strategies. Utilizing the poverty and welfare rhetoric of Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, this thesis argues that rhetorical definition was central to presidential rhetoric on these critical social controversies in the 1960s and 1980s. In order to advance their proposals both presidents found it essential to provide definitions of "the poor," to delineate the government's responsibilities to the disadvantaged, and to articulate the wisdom of their own policies in meeting those responsibilities. The analysis reveals that, in different ways, both presidents met with mixed success in matching the expectations they created through their discourse, with the realities achieved through their policies.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: DEFINITION AND
PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC

"Poverty in the midst of plenty is a paradox that must not go unchallenged in this country" -John F. Kennedy

On January 8, 1964, during his first State of the Union Address, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty” (1964a 3). This war became the cornerstone of his Great Society program and became synonymous with his plans for welfare reform. Seventeen years later, President Ronald Reagan came face-to-face with the national epidemic of poverty, coupled with rising economic turmoil. On February 18, 1981, Reagan proposed drastic welfare reform, and assured the nation that the “truly needy” would always have their “safety net.”

This project assesses the poverty and welfare rhetoric of Presidents Johnson and Reagan. The analysis focuses on the significance of presidential rhetoric in the twentieth century, the importance of definition in the rhetorical practices of Johnson and Reagan, and how the definitions they advanced functioned as integral features of their discourses on poverty and welfare. From Johnson’s War on Poverty to Reagan’s “safety net,” presidents have redefined poverty’s causes, effects, and victims. The definition of poverty changed with each new politician at the forefront of the discussion. Indeed,
analysis of public discourse about poverty reveals that definition is a central challenge to all who propose to understand, let alone solve, one of American culture's continuing social ills. In addition to the issue of definition, central to this analysis is the increasing scope of presidential rhetoric and Americans' continued faith in their leaders to provide accurate pictures of reality concerning the far-less fortunate.

Poverty's Place in Presidential Rhetoric

In *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffrey K. Tulis provides an overview of the concept of the power of presidents to move publics. The scope and frequency of presidential speeches has significantly changed since the inception of the office in the late-eighteenth century. Tulis delineates this evolution, describing the types of speeches typically delivered by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century presidents and juxtaposing them against modern presidential discourse: "Very few were domestic 'policy speeches' of the sort so common now, and attempts to move the nation by moral suasion in the absence of war were almost unknown" (6). Although in the early twenty-first century, daily presidential discourse is commonplace, Americans were not always so receptive to frequent presidential address. Paul Haskell Zernicke, in his work *Pitching the Presidency*, offers an explanation for this gradual shift: "The rhetorical presidency of today is attributable to a conscious transformation in both the public and presidential perception of a president's constitutional leadership" (23). The shift is due in part to presidents' actively changing the role of the presidency and the public allowing them to do so.
In the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, what was considered appropriate presidential rhetoric differed markedly from what is considered appropriate today. America's founders supported the idea that "leaders should confine their speeches to celebrating the state and rededicating the nation to its most cherished principles. Rhetoric that exceeded this was deemed dangerous because it hindered deliberation and invited demagoguery" (Zernicke 23). According to James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, authors of "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency," the only speech required of early American presidents was the State of the Union Address. Allowing presidents to discuss issues beyond ceremony or absolute necessity was not a major concern to the nation's founders. "According to the Federalist Papers, the founding fathers believed that presidential orations should be limited to messages to Congress, addresses that endorsed republican principles, and relatively minor proclamations" (Zernicke 23). The study of presidential rhetoric expanded to include the changing organization of the presidency.

The belief that presidents should limit their rhetoric was upheld through the nineteenth century. Richard Ellis observes, "In many nineteenth-century elections, presidential candidates barely uttered a word in their own behalf for fear they would be accused of unseemly ambition and demagoguery" (1). It was not until the twentieth century that it became acceptable for presidents to engage in other types of discourse. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, presidents began gradually to justify their discussions of other issues. Presidential rhetoric scholar David Michael Ryfe notes, "since the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, each successive president has devoted more attention to [presidential communication] than the last" (1). Analysis of
presidential discourse from the mid-twentieth century to the present reveals texts devoted to a variety of topics—religion, poverty, war, illegal substances, and morality, any issue that is being discussed not only in the political realm but also the public realm. In the last one hundred years, “rhetoric has become both the entrance to and exit from the power of public opinion” (Zernicke 24).

Americans have become easily susceptible to presidential persuasion because they have grown accustomed to the chief executives’ attempts to change citizens’ attitudes. Unlike in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, it is no longer unusual to hear presidential speeches. Ceaser et. al, state:

Popular or mass rhetoric, which Presidents once employed only rarely, now serves as one of their principal tools in attempting to govern the nation. Whatever doubts Americans may now entertain about the limitations of presidential leadership, they do not consider it unfitting or inappropriate for presidents to attempt to “move” the public by programmatic speeches that exhort and set forth grand and ennobling views (4).

This allowance enables presidents to forward their opinions on a wide range of issues, frequently on controversial topics.

Understanding how presidents broaden their credibility to discuss such topics is important for Americans in general, and for communication scholars in particular. Zernicke explains that “as the most visible national leader, the President is the popular pulse of American politics. His prominence simplifies politics and government for many” (11). This awareness begins as early as elementary school. The president is typically the first figure in government that young students are exposed to, and the office
becomes symbolic of the government as a whole. (Zemicke 10) Roderick Hart, distinguished scholar of presidential rhetoric and Dean of the College of Communication at the University of Texas, observes that modern Americans are used to seeing their presidents give speeches:

If asked to draw a freehand sketch of their president, most modern Americans would begin with a podium. They would do so because the evening news they watch is largely designed to let them overhear their president... because their own fondest memories of their presidents are of moments oratorical—John Kennedy warning the Russians about certain missiles in Cuba; Lyndon Johnson imploring his fellow Southerners to grant voting rights to all Americans. (1)

Even the content of the speeches is no longer surprising. “We think nothing of the fact,” Ryfe writes, “that recent presidents have used parts of their State of the Union addresses to come out in favor of school uniforms and against the use of steroids in baseball” (1). Presidential rhetoric is not only increasing in terms of frequency, but also in the types of topics covered.

Americans often judge the effectiveness of their presidents based on how often they hear from them. In The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age, Hart argues that “public speech no longer attends the processes of governance—it is governance” (14). Moreover, he adds, “Americans have come to believe that governance occurs only when their presidents talk to them” (15). This requirement for discourse allows contemporary presidents to talk about an expanded range of subjects, and to do so more often than their predecessors. Americans are also more accepting of what their presidents speak about. Hart acknowledges the growing
sphere of presidential rhetoric: "We find it quite natural, now, that a chief executive would be thoroughly familiar with tax law, scientific breakthroughs, American history, and the ways of the Lord" (11). Such topics would have been considered taboo or inappropriate for early American presidents but are now common place.

The public looks to the president for leadership on a wide range of issues, then, poverty and welfare reform among them. According to Zemicke, presidents are more than happy to comply, as presidential speeches increased 500% from 1945 to 1975. (21) An American president giving a speech on any topic is no longer the exception, but the rule. "By some estimates, presidents now spend almost one-third of their time appealing to the public via press conferences, speeches, and public appearances" (Zemicke 21). Presidential rhetoric must be carefully, continuously and critically analyzed, lest the fears of the founding fathers become a reality.

This study focuses on the increased scope and techniques of presidential rhetoric. The primary concern is with the strategies presidents use to advance an argument or champion a cause, with specific attention to the potential and limits of definition as a persuasive tactic. In his article, "Presidential Rhetoric: Definition of a Discipline of Study," rhetorical scholar Theodore Windt discusses a president's resources for power. "The power upon which all other powers rest," he argues, is "public opinion." (xxiii). An adequate study of this resource must include, according to Windt, an "inquiry into a variety of other rhetorical weapons in his political arsenal that he uses to reach and persuade those in the public who either comprise his support, or pose opposition to him" (xxiii). By critically examining poverty and welfare rhetoric, a contribution can be made to the larger discussion of presidential rhetoric. A closer look at the "rhetorical weapons"
of Johnson and Reagan enhances the broader knowledge of the rhetorical strategies of the presidency. Political science scholar Elmer E. Cornwell notes the value of such work when he writes that the president’s “prime weapon for influencing policy making is his ability to command and influence a national audience” (303). Through rhetoric, presidents present, advocate, or defend their arguments. Analyzing presidential rhetoric on poverty affords an opportunity to study the influence of such discourse in efforts to change the attitudes or beliefs of audiences.

Defining Reality

Amos Kiewe, claims that modern presidents are “image makers. As such, they seek the opportunity to define situations and to construct the reality they wish the public to accept” (xvi). To create and reinforce this reality, speakers seek to define what Ed Schiappa refers to as “facts of essence” (6). Facts of essence are concerned with discovering what something “is in reality” (6). Recently, politicians, presidents especially, have had to redefine facts of essence, such as life and death. Schiappa observes that advances in medical technology have made defining death more complicated than in the past. It can be argued that life ends when a person stops breathing, their heart stops beating, or their brain stops functioning. The same can be said in the debate on defining life. Some interest groups argue that life begins at conception, others that life begins at various stages during the pregnancy. (Schiappa 37) In much the same way, presidents, through an increasingly rhetorical presidency, can redefine poverty to create a certain reality concerning what poverty is, whom it affects, and the gravity of the problems it creates. The definition can take various forms. The
definition can be framed to show that poverty is a national epidemic that can only be cured by immediate and forceful government intervention, as was championed by Johnson. Alternatively, poverty can be defined to include only a small minority whose problem is easily manageable with little government interference, as will be seen in the analysis of Reagan’s rhetoric.

If presidents can successfully restructure reality—by redefining “life” or “death,” “poverty” or “welfare”—they may leave a powerful legacy. At the very least, presidents can shape American discourse. As Zernicke observes, “studies of rhetoric confirm that at the very least a president can shape the language that Americans use to discuss and evaluate political issues” (4), subtly telling the American people not only what to think about, but how to think about it. Presidential discourse is no longer confined to issues of security, ceremony, or diplomacy, but now stretches to issues of morality and reality. Michael Foley observes of the presidency in his essay, “Presidential Leadership and the Presidency,” that “the office may be in the process of becoming a necessarily ideological agency whose power and authority are becoming increasingly dependent upon the mobilizing force of national ideals, faiths and symbols” (47). As the office changes and evolves, the study of presidential rhetoric must be expanded to provide useful and instructive criticism.

Presidents often exploit the power of definition to construct a vision of reality for their constituents. Schiappa argues that “all definitions are political, specifically in two respects: first, definitions always serve particular interests; second, the only definitions of consequence are those that have been empowered through persuasion or coercion” (69). Schiappa endorses Thomas Kuhn’s contention that in “almost any arena of human
interaction, the prevailing beliefs and interests of those in authority will be defended even
to the point of dogmatism” (67). Americans must consider why they allow their
presidents to engage in definitional rhetoric and be aware of the power involved with
redefining life, death, or socioeconomic status. Rhetorical scholars must consider how
that reality is constructed and how the public is persuaded to accept it.

It is not always obvious that politicians are engaging in the redefinition of reality,
as it is often under the guise of typical policy making. Schiappa cites philosopher
Douglas Walton, for example, to argue that it is “taken for granted that words, especially
scientific terms and terms used in legal statutes and government regulations, have an
objective meaning” (7). Speakers aspire to reshape the definition of poverty in order to fit
the argumentative strategy they intend to employ. Speakers do this easily, because
determining whether someone is a member of the culture of poverty is not as easy as
determining if someone is a man or a woman—there are no clear cut physical symptoms.
Poverty is ambiguous, and this ambiguity can be used to the rhetorical advantage of the
speaker.

Americans’ first attempts to define poverty came as early as the Revolutionary
back as 1776, Adam Smith . . . defined the lack of ‘necessaries’ as the experience of
being unable to consume ‘not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary
for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for
creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without’”(11). But even this definition
is far from precise or absolute. Jean Bethke Elshtain, writes in Real Politics: At the
Center of Everyday Life, that, “words are often murky, ambiguous, concealing—not

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because some chicanery is afoot, nor because the language user is thinking sloppily, but because reality does not, most of the time, lend itself to common sense representation” (55). Indeed, defining poverty is not a clear task with correct or incorrect quantitative answers. Presidents often take it upon themselves to change the ambiguous reality into a definite truth.

In attempting to define reality, presidents must often utilize what philosopher Charles L. Stevenson calls a persuasive definition. Stevenson explains in *Ethics and Language* that these definitions are employed “consciously or unconsciously, in an effort to secure . . . a redirection of people’s attitudes” (210). In introducing persuasive definitions, Walton maintains that “popular opinions tend to take certain assumptions about definitions for granted without reflecting on them too deeply” (122). Because definitions are often taken for granted, it is the responsibility of rhetorical scholars to lend a critical eye to the discourse. Constructing a reality involves not only advancing a definition, but persuading the audience to accept it. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, authors of *A New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, assert that “a definition is always a matter of choice. Anyone making such a choice, particularly if a dissociative definition is involved, will generally claim to have isolated the single, true meaning of the concept, or at least the only reasonable meaning or the only meaning corresponding to current usage” (448). It is here, at the intersection of reality and perceived reality, that criticism must begin.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson offer an explanation of the link between presidential rhetoric and the act of defining reality, when other politicians and critics discuss topics about which they are not qualified to speak. They observe that
“only a president can issue a presidential inaugural and, in the process, become ‘the president’; only a president can issue a pardon and, in so doing, absolve a malefactor of a federal crime; only a president can state objections to a piece of legislation and, thereby, mandate its reconsideration by Congress” (4). The American people are accustomed to presidents doing “special things,” things only they can do. This begins to explain why citizens are willing to accept presidential discourse on scientific, religious or moral controversies.

Poverty Rhetoric

If poverty and welfare are to be discussed productively, politicians must first supply a definition of poverty. Once that definition has been established, they must persuade the audience to accept it. In his frank discussion of stereotypes in the 1960s Michael Harrington notes the challenges this opportunity “to define” poses. He describes in *The Other America* the attitude of the average American toward the poor: “Here is the most familiar version of social blindness: ‘The poor are that way because they are afraid of work. And anyway they all have big cars. If they were like me (or my father or my grandfather), they could pay their own way. But they prefer to live on the dole and cheat the taxpayers’” (14). Political scientist Murray Edelman puts it this way in *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail*: “[W]e want to be reassured that ‘Man is the captain of his fate’” (4). In the mid-twentieth century, Americans had distinct attitudes that the poor were in poverty because of some fatal flaw, laziness or the refusal to work hard. The middle and upper classes were convinced that stepping out of poverty was as simple as the old adage, of “pulling yourself up by the boot straps.”
David T. Ellwood, claims in Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family that Americans think “people can escape poverty if only they use some elbow grease. The poor are those who lack the determination to make it” (7). Many Americans subscribed to the reality that poverty was something that happened other places, particularly in third world countries and destitute nations. Ben Bagdikian, in his book, In the Midst of Plenty: The Poor in America, contends that the 1960s notions of poverty were taken for granted, that Americans’ assumptions of the poor allowed them to ignore the problem of poverty:

We are not yet convinced that there is truly a world inside our society in which the American dream is dying, where when it rains at night everyone gets up to move beds away from the leaks. Where there is no electricity but discarded refrigerators are valued to keep food safe from rats. Where regularly in the last week of the month whole families live on things like berries and bread. (6)

Instead, Bagdikian states, “we are inclined to think that this happens only to the physical and psychological cripples, that they suffer in small numbers in isolated geographic pockets” (7). These attitudes can be reinforced or disproved based on the politician’s effort to define or redefine poverty.

In America’s Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century, Foundation Professor of History emeritus at Brown University, James T. Patterson characterizes conservative opinion at the time Johnson declared a War on Poverty. “First, poor people deserved their fate. ‘The fact is,’ Goldwater said, ‘that most people who have no skill have had no education for the same reason—low intelligence or low ambition.’ In the United States, people are rewarded by ‘merit and not by fiat’” (140). This opinion was consistent with those of conservative pundits. “‘The only solution to poverty,’ wrote the
conservative columnist Henry Hazlitt, "is free enterprise and continued economic
growth—those things which made America great" (140).

These attitudes continued to influence popular opinion throughout Johnson's
term. "Most middle-class Americans," Patterson asserts, "continued to stereotype the
poor disparagingly and to recoil at the thought of expanding welfare" (153). Johnson
faced strong stereotypes connected to welfare as well. Patterson discusses a study done
in 1965 that measured attitudes of Americans toward welfare recipients. According to
the report, "50 percent of respondents favored denying relief to unwed mothers who had
further illegitimate children; 20 percent favored sterilizing the mothers. The poll showed
that 84 percent wanted (11 percent opposed) to require able-bodied people on relief to
take 'any job offered which pays the going wage'" (107).

These visions of poverty were not novel; their roots can be traced to the early
American settlers. Even before America became a nation, settlers held distinct opinions
about the impoverished among them. In the early seventeenth-century, poverty was
considered not as a misfortune, but "as a vice, and unemployed men were often either
bound out as indentured servants, whipped and forced out of town, or put in jail" (Iceland
11). The only citizens exempt from such treatment were the elderly and children.
Iceland notes of the early colonists, "rugged individualism was the idea, and able-bodied
poor people were thought to be lazy and morally degenerate" (120). These fatally
negative views of the impoverished continued through the eighteenth- and nineteenth-
centuries. Patterson discusses Americans' attitudes at the end of the nineteenth-century,
when the poor were considered "lazy, apathetic, childlike and sensual" (20). The attitude
towards welfare can be attributed to the “reality” associated with it. The stigma is the result of a construction of reality, and can be enforced or completely altered by rhetoric.

There was a backlash against this opinion in the early 1960s, due in part to the writings of Harrington and Bagdikian. Because of these works, Patterson notes, “after many years of neglect, economists, sociologists, and anthropologists at last began to scrutinize poverty and to ask harder questions about its causes, effects, and cures” (97). Various political and public media covered the issue with renewed vigor. For example, Time magazine published an article on October 1, 1965, that offered a blunt discussion of prevailing poverty. The author concluded, “Invisible or not the poor are real.” Despite a dubious audience, the author then illustrated:

Fifteen of them live in two rooms in one Atlanta building, where they cannot even make love in private. “I ain’t got no stove in the basement and I ain’t got no stove in the kitchen,” says a Harlem woman who lives in a building jammed with whores, rats and babies. “I ain’t got no paint and I ain’t got no windows and I ain’t got no providements. I keep the place clean just so the doctor can come in, and some day the undertaker. What’s a poor person? A poor person is when you see me!” (“The Poor” 4).

Even if the American audience could be persuaded through articles like this that the poor were present in the country, Patterson notes a more significant problem. “Most important,” he argues, “in the early 1960s Americans did not consider poverty and welfare urgent or deeply troubling problems. . . . The rediscovery of poverty occurred not in the trough of a depression, not at a time of social turmoil, but in the midst of the most sustained period of economic well-being in national history” (108).
In order to understand fully any rhetorical act, the rhetorical situation must be considered. Johnson and Reagan were presented with significantly different rhetorical situations. Johnson launched his War on Poverty in a time of perceived affluence, while Reagan championed his welfare reform in a time of national economic crisis. The rhetorical situations of Johnson and Reagan in presenting their plans for welfare reform are examined in the following chapters.

Analytical Approach

Presidential texts—speeches, statements, press conferences, etc—and the autobiographies by Johnson and Reagan provide the data for the criticism that follows. The need to define poverty, to provide its scope and limits, as seen above, was especially necessary in 1964 due to the sudden surge in attention to poverty. Given the influence of Johnson’s Great Society programs on poverty and welfare rhetoric, analysis begins with his declaration of a War on Poverty. David Zarefsky highlights the political strategy involved in the pronouncement. He writes in *President Johnson’s War on Poverty*, that LBJ had to “safeguard and nurture the Kennedy legacy, in keeping with his role as executor of the late president’s political will. But as president in his own right, he also needed to define himself as a leader separate and distinct from President Kennedy” (23). Johnson’s solution, Zarefsky continues, was to identify himself with “a program which Kennedy supporters might champion enthusiastically but which was not yet publicly labeled as a Kennedy effort” (23).

To initiate the analysis, Johnson’s “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union: January 8, 1964” is examined. In this speech, Johnson declared an
“unconditional war on poverty” (1964a 3). In The Persistence of Poverty in the United States, Garth L. Magnum, Stephen L. Magnum and Andrew M. Sum argue that Johnson had first to define poverty before outlining his plan to defeat it. (78) Initiating this process, Johnson first showed the severity of the enemy, by defining some leading causes that contribute to the growing poverty problem. Johnson then defined his plan by outlining his strategy to win the war, including raising the quality of teaching in the school systems, increasing the number of workers eligible for the minimum wage, widening the food stamp program and providing more housing for the poor and elderly.

This speech illuminates Johnson’s attempts to redefine poverty in America. It was his first major attempt to provide a new definition in contrast to the prevailing assumptions about poverty. Declaring the war on poverty was not as simple as showing that a problem existed; Johnson also had to show the American people that this issue was a national concern. Zarefsky asserts that, “From the colonial period onward, the dominant belief was that poverty was an individual, not a social, problem” (President Johnson’s War 38). Johnson countered public preconceptions. “Poverty,” he argued, “is a national problem, requiring improved national organization and support. 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” (1964a 3). Johnson acknowledged common assumptions that the poor are in their situation because of laziness or lack of ambition, but he offered an alternative view in his attempt to redefine poverty. He maintained, “Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training,
in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children" (1964a 4). By offering a new cause for poverty, Johnson began to redefine reality to frame his War as the only appropriate solution.

Johnson also discussed the weapons that would help win the war on poverty: “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” (1964a 3). Johnson’s introduction to the War on Poverty, his description of poverty’s causes, and his plan of “attack” make this an ideal speech to begin to analyze Johnson’s rhetorical attempts to redefine the reality of poverty.

Though Johnson declared the War on Poverty in his initial State of the Union Address there are other speeches that must be considered when analyzing this genre of his rhetoric. The speeches used here date from as early as December 4 1963, in his remarks at a meeting with the AFL-CIO Executive Council, and continue to his final State of the Union Address in 1969. The audiences addressed in these speeches are diverse, including the participants in the Conference on Women in the War on Poverty, the Convention of the Communications Workers of America, and the Convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.

Examination of Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric on welfare reform begins with analysis of his “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery.” Delivered February 18, 1981, this speech differs vastly in tone and substance from Johnson’s rhetoric. As American Studies scholar Alex Waddan notes, “Reagan had been opposed to the War on Poverty from its very conception,” even “well before there
was enough material evidence for either praise or damnation” (125). In his 1981 speech, Reagan created a social reality describing the state of economic affairs. He began by delineating the severity of the situation, discussing rising inflation and high unemployment. After he painted a somber picture of the nation’s financial woes, he turned to his solutions, including budget cuts.

Reagan proposed cuts in direct Federal spending, yet acknowledged the fears of many people who depended on government aid. He assured them, “we will continue to fulfill the obligations that spring from our national conscience” (1981b 2). He began to outline his own definition of poverty, and provided encouragement to those who were dependent on welfare. Those “who through no fault of their own,” he said, “must depend on the rest of us—the poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need—can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts” (1981b 2). Here, Reagan clearly defined his intentions for the fight against poverty. This was particularly strategic in that it seemed to promise relief from poverty but still allowed Reagan to be ambiguous about his plans. David Zarefsky, Carol Miller-Tutzauer, and Frank E Tutzauer, identify the rhetorical strategies employed by Reagan in this address. In “Reagan’s Safety Net for the Truly Needy: The Rhetorical Uses of Definition,” they argue that the “twin phrases, ‘safety net’ and ‘truly needy,’ gave Ronald Reagan a valuable rhetorical foundation in 1981. They both sustained the faith of his own supporters and reassured his opponents that he was not going to destroy the true essentials of the social programs in which they believed” (115).

In this speech, Reagan listed several programs that would be exempt from cuts, seemingly in an effort to reassure Americans dependant on government aid. Such
programs included Social Security; Medicare; supplemental income for the blind, aged and disabled; veterans' pensions; school breakfasts and lunches for children of low income families, and Project Head Start. Although these programs would continue to receive funding, he stipulated their continued existence. He provided a clear redefinition and redirection of the Food Stamp program, for example: “The Food Stamp program will be restored to its original purpose, to assist those without resources to purchase sufficient nutritional food. We will, however, save $1.8 billion in fiscal year 1982 by removing from eligibility those who are not in real need or who are abusing the program” (1981b 3). He also limited other programs, stating his “intention to keep the school breakfast and lunch programs for those in true need. By cutting back on meals for children of families who can afford to pay, the savings will be $1.6 billion in the fiscal year 1982” (1981b 3).

In order to offer a complete analysis of Reagan’s poverty rhetoric, several other speeches are examined. As with Johnson’s speeches, the texts selected cover the span of his presidency. The February 18th, 1981, address is the earliest speech studied, and the last is his “Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Knights of Malta in New York, New York,” presented on January 13, 1989. The occasions for these speeches and those in between were diverse including a panel on welfare reform, a Republican fundraising dinner, and remarks for members of the American Legislative Exchange Council.

Several reasons commend the choice of data examined. First, the texts studied to establish the foundation of the analysis were both given early in the presidents’ terms, within the first two months. Second, the principal text is the first major speech dealing with the issue of poverty. Finally, each speech offered an overview of the presidents’
plans for welfare reform. In order to discuss the plan, each president had first to redefine poverty for their audience, so that their reforms constituted viable solutions.

Conclusion

"Presidential rhetoric" Windt argues, "is only one of the powers available to the President, but in a democracy, it may well be the fundamental power upon which all others rest" (xxiii). Poverty is an exemplary case to examine when considering the power of presidential rhetoric, for an expanded analysis of such discourse can illuminate the strategies politicians use to create and advance a specific definition of reality. Although the amount of research on presidential rhetoric is not meager, there are still questions to be explored. In an era in which the frequency of presidential speeches has increased, the need for careful scrutiny may never have been greater. Tulis states, "The rhetorical presidency may have been generally ignored as an object of concern not only because it has become so familiar and comfortably democratic, but also because it is hard to believe that mere rhetoric could be of consequence to the development of American institutions" (13). It is this assumption of "mere rhetoric" that the study of presidential rhetoric ultimately challenges.

John Iceland contends that our discussions of poverty contribute to its continued redefinition in America. "The persistence of poverty in the United States reflects more than just an aggregation of individual failings. Structural factors, such as the way we understand and define poverty . . . shape current trends" (2). If for no other reason, it is important to understand the poverty problem in terms of its adverse effects on the American economy. Iceland maintains that "Declining levels of poverty contribute to a
healthy economy by increasing the number of people who can purchase goods and services; that increase, in turn, stimulates economic growth and raises average standards of living” (3). More importantly, poverty rhetoric must be analyzed further, as the fight against poverty is far from over. Garth L. Magnum, Stephen L. Magnum, and Andrew M. Sum observe that now, forty years after Johnson declared war, “that nation still has not won that war”; in fact, “there are more poor people and poor families in the United States today than in the 1960s” (1). The issue of poverty and welfare rhetoric continues to remain salient as politicians face the problem now and in the foreseeable future. Leaders’ efforts to define the problem, identify potential solutions, and characterize proposed initiatives thus merit close attention.
CHAPTER TWO

JOHNSON’S RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION
OF POVERTY

On January 8, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared war. In his first State of the Union speech, he announced an absolute and total war against an enemy that had plagued Americans for generations. Johnson committed federal, regional, and personal resources to fighting this deadly enemy. Johnson pledged in his speech that his “administration today, here and now, declares an unconditional war on poverty in America” (1964a 2). Despite much debate about the success of the War on Poverty, its rhetorical significance is unquestioned.

Though much critical attention has been paid to the rhetorical strategies of Johnson, most of the focus has been on his use of the war metaphor. This project seeks to go beyond those analyses, to dissect the additional rhetorical strategies Johnson utilized to promote his War on Poverty. Though Johnson frequently weaves the war metaphor in and out of his discourse, he punctuates this effort with several other rhetorical strategies. First, Johnson took advantage of the rediscovery of poverty in the early 1960s to gain support for his initiatives, and used the newfound presence of the topic to redefine poverty and welfare for his audience. Second, Johnson stressed the importance of government intervention, specifically a strong central government supporting local efforts, with the end result being tangible benefits for all Americans. Third, the president
used stories of children to appeal to audience members whose stereotypes of the poor made them reluctant to help impoverished adults. Finally, Johnson referenced classic American values in an effort to link the War on Poverty to images of American victory.

The Rediscovery of Poverty: American Attitudes of the Early 1960s

Johnson utilized the popular discussions of the early 1960s to advance the War on Poverty. The early years of the decade saw a popular rediscovery of the perils of poverty. Influential books including Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* and Ben Bagdikian’s *In the Midst of Plenty: The Poor in America*, brought poverty to the forefront of popular consciousness. Harrington has been credited as the man who “discovered” poverty, therefore proving the significance of these works. This period saw a surge in the attention that poverty programs and welfare reforms received. As historian James T. Patterson argues, “It is much easier to observe that poverty became a subject of debate than to explain why. Destitution was nothing new, as America’s 39 million poor people (by official definition) in 1960 could attest” (98). Nevertheless, writers and political activists took advantage of this attention to further the cause of the poor. Johnson also used the popularity of these “new” ideas to promote the War on Poverty. It has been reported that Johnson read Harrington’s book, and *The Other America* has been credited with influencing policy making in the Johnson administration.

Because of the new literature, Americans were introduced to different views and explanations for the causes of poverty. In an effort to change the direction of public attitudes, Harrington introduced the concept of the culture of poverty, which he theorized
was a vicious cycle. He argued that the poor were not a group of lazy people who refused to leave their substandard conditions; rather, they were a community caught in an unbreakable rotation of despair. Harrington explained the cycle, beginning with the fact that within the culture of poverty, the poor are sick more than any other group. Harrington attributed this to substandard conditions, lack of proper nutrition, inadequate medical care, and unhygienic conditions. Once they become sick, they remain sick longer than any other group due to the same reasons they become sick in the first place. Their sickness results in lost “wages and work, and [they] find it difficult to hold a steady job. And because of this, they cannot pay for good housing, for a nutritious diet, for doctors” (15). Thus, the cycle is perpetuated.

This idea of poverty as a continuous cycle was a novel one, and Johnson used it frequently to describe the desperate situation of the poor. In his first State of the Union address, for instance, he initially declared, “very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children” (1964a 2). He began to create a reality for the American people in which the impoverished are often helpless and have no recourse. Johnson constructed a world where poverty was not the result of an indolent individual with no drive or motivation to be successful. It was instead the mere lack of resources for Americans longing to belong to a “decent community”. Rhetorical scholar David Zarefsky notes, “To choose a definition is, in effect, to plead a cause, as if one were advancing a claim and offering support for it” (“Presidential Rhetoric” 612). By using
Harrington's theories as the basis for his definition of poverty, Johnson constructed an argument, laying the foundation by defining poverty as a devastating cycle. This was not merely an attempt to elicit sympathy from his audience but was the president making a direct claim regarding the reality of poverty in the United States.

Months later, Johnson described to the United States Congress situations similar to those examined by Harrington, in which a "young man or woman who grows up without a decent education, in a broken home, in a hostile and squalid environment, in ill health or in the face of racial injustice—that young man or woman is often trapped in a life of poverty" (1964d 1). Again, this was not only an attempt to paint a picture for his audience, it was direct reinforcement of his initial definition. Johnson emphasized the destructive circumstance as a trap and he stressed the importance of breaking the cycle. "The vicious circle of poverty—in which one generation's poverty, ignorance, and disease bred the same problems for the next—must be broken" (1964c 6). Here Johnson definitively stated that if the problem of poverty were not eradicated, it would only continue its deadly cycle. The president emphasized the writings of authors like Harrington and Bagdikian by stressing the hopelessness of many of America's poor. He defined poverty as a central element of an unfortunate circumstance, not the deliberate choice of lazy or unambitious citizens. "Yet for 31 million Americans," Johnson declared, "poverty is neither remote in time, nor removed in space. It is cruel and present reality. It makes choices for them. It determines their future prospects—despite our hope and belief that in America, opportunity has no bounds for any man" (1967c14). He used his position to widen the distribution of these ideals, and developed them to argue for an
all out war on poverty. By postulating the idea of poverty as a cycle, Johnson began to redefine poverty for his audience.

Johnson defined the reality of poverty, and therefore set the terms of the debate for his audience, by endorsing Harrington's theory. "Because of his prominent political position," Zarefsky argues, "and his access to the means of communication, the president, by defining a situation, might be able to shape the contest in which events or proposals are viewed by the public" ("Presidential Rhetoric" 611). Johnson utilized the unique situation of the presidency to forward the definition of poverty that would best support his initiatives. Johnson stated, "Poverty defies simple description. It is a cycle which begins with an infancy of deprivation, continues in a youth of hopelessness, extends to a jobless adulthood, and finally ends—for those who survive—in a bleak and despairing old age. At every stage, the conditions of life are poor housing, inadequate education and training, deficient health care, and often, gnawing hunger" (1967d 1). Such bleak descriptions illustrated that poverty was a cycle that influenced Americans of all ages and backgrounds. Johnson was careful to show poverty's range, and its lack of discrimination for race or region, emphasizing a key argument in the poverty literature of the early 1960s. These ideas are advanced as assertions without the possibility of a contrary opinion. Johnson framed this definition as fact, as an accurate depiction of reality. "The presidential definition" Zarefsky explains, "is stipulated, offered as if [it] were natural and uncontroversial rather than chosen and contestable" ("Presidential Rhetoric" 612). If this definition were accepted, it was more likely that Johnson's War on Poverty would seem an appropriate solution.
Several years after declaring the War on Poverty, Johnson still referenced the nondiscriminatory nature of the enemy of poverty. He observed, for instance, that poverty

wears different masks in different places. We think of it as a city disease. But almost half of American poverty is found in our rural areas. We sometimes may think of it as a Negro affliction, but seven in ten poor people are white. Poverty afflicts the old man and it affects the young child. Poverty is found on an Indian reservation, in the hollows of West Virginia, in the migrant camps of Oregon, and here, in Washington D.C., as well as throughout my State (1967b 3).

These descriptions comprised an attempt to change the definition of poverty as localized in economically depressed areas like “slums” or “ghettos.” Johnson cast the problem as a national epidemic by showing poverty’s pervasive nature. He argued in a speech in New York City, for example, that “poverty stalks not only in the hills and the valleys of Appalachia. It is here today. It is here in this city on all sides of the track right around where you live. It is the widow around the corner barely surviving on a pension of $70 a month. It is the teenager down the block unprepared by schooling and unwanted by an employer. It is the retired factory worker, sick of body and tired of soul, depending on charity for his medical needs” (1964j 2). By showing the breadth of poverty’s devastating effects, Johnson reinforced poverty as a viable and dangerous enemy. This redefinition was necessary as not all Americans were convinced of the severity of the poverty problem. As Communication scholar Robert Asen explains, “the sociopolitical context in which [the president] declared war suggested a forming but not yet formed public view that poverty presented a grave national problem” (53). Therefore, Johnson
constantly returned to Harrington’s theories within his own definitions of poverty. Harrington’s emphasis on poverty as a cycle, coupled with Johnson’s declarations of poverty as a national problem, became the cornerstone of the reality that Johnson advanced throughout his presidential rhetoric.

Several of the books about poverty in the early 1960s responded directly to John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society*. Galbraith wrote that at the end of the 1950s, “in the United States, there has been great and quite unprecedented affluence” (1). He described an America free from the poverty that plagued other nations. He justified this reality by stating that, “One would not expect that the preoccupations of a poverty-ridden world would be relevant in one where the ordinary individual has access to amenities—foods, entertainment, personal transportation, and plumbing—in which not even the rich rejoiced a century ago” (2). Galbraith described a sort of “case poverty” that included “the poor farm family with the junk-filled yard and the dirty children playing in the bare dirt” (325). Galbraith’s opinion was a popular one. Indeed, his book received critical acclaim and spent months on the best-seller list when it was released in 1958.

Galbraith attributed case poverty to the inadequacies of the individual. “Case poverty” he argued, “is commonly and properly related to some characteristic of the individuals so afflicted. Nearly everyone else has mastered his environment . . . but some quality peculiar to the individual or family involved—mental deficiency, bad health, inability to adapt to the discipline of life, uncontrollable procreation, alcohol, some educational handicap unrelated to community shortcoming, or perhaps a combination of several of these handicaps—has kept these individuals from participating in the general well-being” (325). In the second edition of his book, he labeled the population of case
poverty as "worthless and, as a simple manifestation of social justice, they suffer for it" (288). Harrington and Bagdikian sought to contradict these descriptions of the poor in the early 1960s. Further, it was stereotypes similar to these that constructed the reality for Americans that Johnson attempted to change.

Much of Johnson’s War on Poverty rhetoric reflected this dramatic dichotomy. He drew directly from Bagdikian’s influential book: “There is too much poverty in the midst of plenty; while our cup is running over, more than 30 million Americans have not tasted its contents” (1964h 1). Johnson discussed the issue directly, comparing the members of the affluent society to the poor in America, in a fashion similar to the styles of Bagdikian and Harrington. He contended in the annual budget message to Congress, “In a nation as rich and productive as ours, we cannot tolerate a situation in which millions of Americans do not have the education, health, and job opportunities for a decent and respected place as productive citizens” (1964c 6). He utilized the assumptions of the affluent society and shifted them to redefine the reality of poverty. The president countered the notions that poverty was not something that happened in America. In defining what poverty meant to impoverished Americans, he lamented:

It means waiting in a surplus food line rather than in a supermarket check-out. It means going without running water rather than worrying about whether you can afford a color television. It means despairing of finding work rather than wondering when you can take your vacation. It means coming home each night empty-handed to look at the expectant faces of your little children who lack the things that they need. It means a lonely battle to maintain pride and self-respect in a family that you cannot provide for—not because you don’t want to and not
because you don't try to, but in a Nation where so many seem to be doing so well
you seem to be finding it difficult (1964i 2)

These remarks at Cumberland, Maryland City Hall demonstrated the amalgamation of the
above mentioned strategies. Here poverty was clearly outlined as a real element of
American society, one that was nation-wide and that affected many different types of
people. This strategy sought to jar the members of the affluent society out of their picture
perfect realities into Johnson’s reality where poverty is a cycle, and its perpetuation is
unavoidable.

Johnson also used the strategy of identification to appeal to the affluent. Kenneth
Burke describes an element of identification that rests on the ability of the persuader to
convince the audience that, though different, the interests of the audience and persuader
are joined. Burke writes, “A is not identical with his [sic] colleague, B. But insofar as
their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even
when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe
so” (20). Part of Johnson’s rhetoric had to appeal to the members of the upper and
middle classes, to convince them that their support was necessary. The principle of
identification helps to explain how he sought to unite a diverse American audience with
the members of the culture of poverty, and against their common enemy.

Communication scholars Edward D. Steele and W. Charles Redding offer insight
into a part of the American ego. “Although the American is notoriously competitive,”
they note, “it is also true that the idea of cooperation as a means to mutually desired ends
has been reinforced since the days of frontier living” (85). Johnson played upon this idea
when he declared: “That the ancient enemy of poverty should thrive and fatten in this
abundant land is a vile and shameful thing. The tax cut is our modern weapon today against unemployment which breeds poverty and ignorance, the inconsiderate allies of apathy and neglect” (1963 2). This strategy created a clear line of division between the war’s supporters and the opposition.

Once Johnson defined a line, his audience was forced to choose sides. One side—that dedicated to winning the War on Poverty—was explicitly more desirable. The other side only fueled the enemy’s fire by supporting “poverty and ignorance, the inconsiderate allies of apathy and neglect.” In describing the perils of poverty, Johnson also attributed such qualities to those who opposed his proposed policy while dissociating them from the War on Poverty’s supporters. For example, shortly after he declared the War on Poverty Johnson said, “If we are to live with pride in a world of decency, we must commit ourselves to removing from the earth the scars and scourge of human poverty and disease and ignorance and intolerance” (1964b 1). The “A” group in Burke’s definition and the “B” group—though perhaps differentiated by a multitude of characteristics including political party, class, race, or gender—are now united, or at least persuaded to believe that their interests are joined. The next goal was to eliminate “poverty,” “disease,” “ignorance,” and “intolerance.” Johnson depicted this unified group as decent, knowledgeable, and courageous. Social psychologist Michael Billig contends that “political orators should argue that the particular policy, which they are advocating, would enhance the general morality that they all share. In doing this, the politicians will be rhetorically identifying with the audience and will also be promoting their own ethos as someone who values what the audience values” (233). This idea is further informed
by Burke’s principle of identification, as Johnson attempted to include himself and his administration with the “decent, knowledgeable, and courageous.”

Government Intervention: Johnson’s Rhetorical Command Center

After defining poverty as a viable enemy and emphasizing that it was widespread and thriving, Johnson argued that defeating poverty constituted a challenge to the entire nation. If poverty were concentrated in select or geographically isolated areas, then the argument might be made that state and local agencies were better suited to handle the problem. Instead, Johnson contended, poverty’s national prominence made it a problem for the federal government.

A defining element of Johnson’s anti-poverty rhetoric was his articulation of the government’s central role in solving the problem. In contrast to Ronald Reagan, who focused on the responsibilities of state governments, Johnson shifted responsibility to the federal level. He did not, though, discount the importance of local and individual efforts. It was in this delicate balance, Johnson maintained, that victory might be secured. He stated, “Our strategy against poverty relies on: the private initiative of every citizen and on the self-help efforts of the poor themselves. The resources of city, county, state and metropolitan agencies. Federal programs to supplement private and local activities and often to supply the vital thrust of innovation” (1967c 2). In his initial declaration of the war, Johnson stressed the importance of 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” (1964a2). While stressing
the importance of government intervention, however, Johnson also made individual citizens responsible for change. "I propose," he stated, "a program which relies upon the traditional and time-tested American methods of organized local community action to help individuals, families, and communities to help themselves" (1964c 6). This strategy allowed the president to emphasize the shared responsibility of both the government and the individual in fighting the War on Poverty, while stressing the importance of a strong backing by the centralized government.

It is here that Johnson began to enlist Americans into his War on Poverty. If poverty were to be a national war, then it must also be a national victory. The responsibility of individuals resonated loudly with his audience, a generation of Americans who had lived through World War II and the Great Depression. Their experiences rendered them more sympathetic to the plight of the poor. The life experiences of Johnson's audience contrasted sharply with the generations Reagan addressed. The audience of the 1980s was widely removed from the economic and national struggles of the previous generation; the 1980s, in fact, was eventually labeled the "me generation." But in the 1960s, the commitment to individual humanitarianism based on shared history, coupled with a belief in active government, allowed Johnson to promote federal policy as a remedy to the challenges faced by the poor.

In arguing that the federal government must intervene to eliminate poverty, Johnson also had to reconstruct the reality of government for his audience. Alex Waddan, Lecturer in American Politics and American Foreign Policy at the University of Leicester, maintains that "Johnson explicitly sought to belie distrust of federal government action in arguing that the state was not something to be feared, but was a
potentially benevolent force whose resources needed to be utilized accordingly” (51). He continues: “Thus, when Johnson launched the War on Poverty it was with the assumption that government had a central role to play in expanding the general affluence of American society so that all could enjoy it” (51). His descriptions of the government’s efforts were usually coupled with praise of local and individual efforts. “But whatever the cause,” Johnson declared during this first State of the Union address, “our joint Federal-local effort must pursue poverty, pursue it wherever it exists—in city slums and small towns, in sharecropper shacks or in migrant worker camps, on Indian Reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in the boom towns and in the depressed areas” (1964a 2). Johnson joined familiar and unfamiliar, large and small together to create a reality of a federal government with a familial relationship to its citizens. Placing responsibility on the federal government allowed the war to have a “command center,” a focal point, and emphasized the “war” as a serious one.

In his rhetoric, Johnson sought to assure Americans skeptical of government intervention that the focus of the War on Poverty would be to help people out of their impoverished states, not to provide a temporary solution that might ultimately keep them there. “We strive for this goal by attacking the causes of poverty,” he declared, “and we are not trying to give people more relief—we want to give people more opportunity” (1964i). Here, the goal of Johnson’s construction of reality was to provide a new definition designed to overcome the stigma of welfare. As discussed earlier there were clear stereotypes in the early 1960s concerning the poor and the government’s attempts to help them. As political scientist Murray Edelman put it, “The world ‘welfare’ evokes an
image of a drain upon the community's tax revenues and of chiselers who do not like to work" (13). To combat such images, Johnson had to make it clear that the War on Poverty would not only supply Americans with the proverbial fish; instead, the programs to be implemented were designed to provide the poor with the skills needed to break the vicious cycle of poverty. He stated, "The war on poverty is not a struggle simply to support people, to make them dependent on the generosity of others. It is a struggle to give people a chance" (1964d 1). Johnson focused his rhetoric by showing that the War on Poverty would provide the necessary tools, or ammunition, necessary to defeat this destructive enemy. He assured his audience that the administration's programs would provide lasting solutions for America's poor. "Our American answer to poverty is not to make the poor more secure in their poverty but to reach down and help them lift themselves out of the ruts of poverty and move with the large majority along the high road of hope and prosperity" (1964n 2). Johnson framed the War on Poverty not as a temporary solution to a nuisance, but as a permanent solution to a devastating problem.

Johnson spent considerable time assuring the average American, more specifically the taxpayers, that their money would not be wasted. Bruce J. Schulman, Professor of history at Boston University and author of *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, observes that, "Waging an all-out 'war on poverty' entailed serious political risks; it had little appeal for the business community and the well-to-do, who worried about the costs of such a battle" (75). Addressing such worries, Johnson explained that

> [t]hese programs are obviously not for the poor or the 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

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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 American 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 (1964a 3)

The president demonstrated how even Americans not affected by the culture of poverty would benefit from proposed initiatives. He cited the members and values of the all-important 1960s nuclear family—young children, aging parents, and members of suburbia. Johnson illustrated how the support of the food stamp program constituted a useful and effective way to help the poor help themselves. He then made it clear how the American economy and, as a consequence, countless Americans would benefit:

This kind of progress all over the country makes the food stamp program a vital part of our work to break the cycle of poverty among our less fortunate citizens. They have a chance to help themselves by investing their own money in food coupons worth more than they paid. The coupons are spent like cash at authorized food stores. Experience and research shows that farmers sell more food, grocers get more business, and the entire economy of the area gets a boost from the added food buying power of food stamp customers (1965d 1).

Defeating this enemy, Johnson argued, would not only improve the quality of life of America’s impoverished, but of all Americans.

He also appealed to the believers in the affluent society while reinforcing the economic values of the American financial system. “I believe we can and we should be
proud that it is our free society—and our system of responsible capitalism—which is first able and willing to make a credible commitment to eradicate poverty among its own people” (1964m 1). In doing so, Johnson sought to create a clear link between the merits of his War on Poverty programs and the capitalist system Americans were feverishly trying to protect in the midst of the Cold War. Johnson praised the importance of a capitalist system as an integral part of the War on Poverty’s success. “A thriving national economy,” he observed, “is critical to our anti-poverty effort. Through a private initiative and wise economic policy, our economy is meeting its fundamental test of producing revenue and employment” (1967c 8). Johnson attempted to pacify his audience by striking a delicate balance between the importance of a flourishing capitalist society and a federal government dedicated to providing aid to the less fortunate.

Children of Poverty: Johnson Defines Another Victim

President Johnson used stories of young children in an effort to gain a sympathetic audience for the War on Poverty. A careful examination of the discourse shows a repeated narrative, one in which anonymous families encounter similar, adverse financial situations. The geographical places he referenced and the exact numbers varied, but the message recurred. Johnson talked about the “fathers who have 11 children and have only $20 on which to support them” (1964g 3) in an address to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Many similar stories surfaced around the same time in 1964, only months after Johnson declared the war on poverty. At times he made his stories more specific, such as an address he delivered at the airport in Huntington, West Virginia, describing his
visit. "Today I saw a father with 11 children who had worked 4 days last month. I saw another father with 8 children who had worked only 5 days last month" (1964e 1). In another speech a few days later, the sentiment was the same though the numbers had changed. Johnson stated, "One man with 11 children told me that he had 4 days’ work last month at $4 a day, not because he does not want work but because it is not there" (1964g 3). In these stories of despair Johnson reinforced Americans’ responsibilities to these desperate families. He emphasized the children involved in these narratives, describing the group most influenced by the helplessness that poverty bestows. The public might resist depictions of helplessness among the adult poor, but surely it was more difficult to argue against proposals that would reduce the vulnerability of impoverished children.

The inspiration for Johnson’s empathy for children, and for the strategic treatment of children’s welfare in his argument, can be traced to his own experiences as a young man. Early in his college career, he took a job in Cotulla, Texas, to earn money to continue his education. Even though he had not yet earned his college degree, he was hired as both a teacher and a principal for the Welhausen Ward Elementary School, a “drab and dingy all-Mexican school in the poorest pat of Cotulla” (Schulman 9). While he was there, Johnson observed the effects of poverty first-hand. Schulman explains, “There was no lunch hour in Welhausen; the hungry pupils had no lunch to eat” (9). At the age of 20, Johnson began to fight against poverty. He worked to provide supplies and equipment for his students, and he stressed the importance of learning English. Schulman notes that Johnson also organized transportation to ensure that his students
could attend class. LBJ’s experience with impoverished children provided a clear point of reference in his empathy for poverty’s victims.

Although Johnson provided his audience with moments of light in the midst of poverty’s darkness, he carefully kept the initial emotional appeal at the forefront of his message. In his remarks to the members of the International Labor Press Association, Johnson recalled,

When I came out of Kentucky and Pennsylvania with unemployed steelworkers and auto workers in South Bend, Ind., and coal workers in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, the thing that impressed me more than anything else was not just the dire poverty that I saw where a man had an income of less than $400 last year, with 8 children to raise, but the faith and hope that man had in the ultimate outcome of his whole situation in this country (1964f 3).

This story placed a heavy responsibility on the American people to ensure a victorious war on poverty. Johnson showed that in addition to the life of the man in the story, the lives of eight children depended on a successful effort.

The president employed a jolting story of perceptions to describe the life of children in poverty. While addressing the delegates to the conference of State Commissions on the Status of Women he explained, “Recently, some underprivileged children in a Head Start project in Massachusetts were given a vocabulary test. The teacher held up flash cards of various objects to see if they could identify them. One of these cards was the picture of a teddy bear. More than 60 percent of the children identified it as a rat. Their world, evidently, had more rats in it than teddy bears” (1966 2). Johnson conjured up a familiar childhood memory for many adults, and used the
blissful musings of childhood to convey a darker reality for America’s poor. He continued to use such narratives as a further means of eliciting sympathy. In a particularly heart-wrenching story, Johnson strategically used a helpless child to convey poverty’s devastation on the American family. He said, “One of the finest women that I ever knew, a social worker, told me that she had called on a family at a mealtime not long ago. She told me the surroundings were meager. During the mealtime she noticed one of the many small children who was not eating. When she asked the child why, the answer was, ‘It is not my day to eat.’” (1964e 3). Johnson did not stop his argument with emotional appeal; instead, he also reminded audiences of their moral obligation to help these children and others like them. In doing so, he reinforced a reality for his audience that went beyond Galbraith’s “case poverty,” and other similar stereotypes, and showcased stories of American families caught in poverty’s deadly cycle.

In addition to emotional appeals involving children, Johnson used America’s youth as a motivator for endorsing the War on Poverty. He utilized this strategy to highlight a special segment of the poverty population in order to make the issue more difficult to ignore. This allowed him to use a different avenue in hopes of soliciting support from the members of the upper and middle class who were skeptical of the “culture of poverty” theory. Given the perceptions of poverty in the early 1960s, as discussed earlier, it was not often easy to arouse sympathy for the poor as a group. As Patterson notes in his analysis of popular sentiment in the 1960s, as “late as March 1964, when President Johnson called for a ‘war on poverty,’ a Gallup Poll showed that 83 percent of Americans thought poverty would never be done away with in the United States” (129).
Poverty was perceived as a lost cause, not worthy of significant government funds or intervention. It was associated with laziness and lack of ambition, and it was therefore difficult to generate sympathy for the poor. To combat the stereotypes, Johnson focused part of his rhetoric on children who suffered. If Americans could not be persuaded to act on behalf of adults in need, Johnson offered an alternative—the chance to help impoverished youth. He painted these efforts as an obligation, as a core value of American ethics—helping those who cannot help themselves. In a message to Congress Johnson implored, “We owe to every young person in America a fair start in life—and this means that we must attack those deficiencies in education, training, health, and job opportunities by which the fetters of poverty are passed on from parents to children. The attack on poverty must be mobilized to support these efforts” (1964c 1). He extended this argument by appealing to his audiences’ sense of duty, layering his argument with the potential of serious regret if action is not taken. “Something must be done to end poverty,” he contended in his address to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in New York City before the 50th Anniversary Convention. “Something must be done now or one day a future generation of Americans will rise up to curse us for the bitter legacy of despair that we passed on to them” (1964j 2). Johnson highlighted initiatives that would appeal to all American parents, regardless of social class, emphasizing the importance of health and education. He made it clear that having wealth should not be a prerequisite to a sound education or basic care.

The president linked the future unhappiness of America’s children to those unsympathetic to or apathetic about, the War on Poverty. “Five and six year old children,” he said, “are inheritors of poverty’s curse and not its creators. Unless we act
these children will pass it onto the next generation, like a family birthmark” (1965a 1).
This rhetorical tactic added another enemy to the war—those who oppose helping the innocent children caught in the cycle through no fault of their own. This strategy was reinforced by the creation of an alternate reality—a reality in which children would be successful, free from poverty, and empowered to make a difference. “We hope, and we envision, and we plan, and we pray for the day when every child born in the world can have all the education that he or she can take,” the president declared in his acceptance speech to the Internal Platform Association upon receiving the Association’s Annual Award. He continued, “that they will be protected in their body and their mind from disease; that they will have a chance to rise out of the poverty that enslaves them and subjugates them; that under leadership of man they can throw off the yokes of the ancient enemies of mankind” (1965c 3). In this reality, children would not be subject to the trap of poverty, but instead could succeed and flourish in a country that supports them. By framing his initiatives as ways to help the children of poverty, Johnson attempted to equate opposition to his welfare programs with a lack of concern for helpless children.

Johnson strengthened his argument by continually referring to poverty as an enemy in his administration’s war, as antagonistic to children. Poverty became an opponent as real as the other adversaries during the Cold War. Johnson sought to evoke sympathy with this image, to show poverty as a real and viable threat to American youth. He stated, “We have taken up the age-old challenge of poverty and we don’t intend to lose generations of our children to this enemy of the human race” (1965b 1). Johnson used his administration’s policies to combat the destructive force of poverty, promising that, “We have mounted an attack upon the final fortresses of poverty. Your children will
live to see the day when poverty has been transformed from a real menace to a remote memory” (1964k 2). This strategy gained power in a society where enemies were elusive and victories were difficult to measure. Moreover, this strategy assigned enemy status to those who were ambivalent to the cause. As Zarefsky notes, the use of the war metaphor “made it easier for the American people to enlist.” However, he continues, “it also made it harder for anyone to oppose the campaign” (President Johnson’s War 33). In this model, not supporting the president’s welfare programs became synonymous with aiding and abetting the enemy. This enemy, however, was a direct threat to the nation’s children. Zarefsky concludes that the “enemy was an impersonal force, but it was aided by certain ‘neutrals’ who did not enlist in the struggle” (President Johnson’s War 33). This strategically allowed the program to be recast as aid for America’s youth when audiences were cynical about the effectiveness of providing help to impoverished adults.

American Values in the Rhetoric of the War on Poverty

In attempting to create and reinforce this new reality of poverty and welfare reform, Johnson alluded to a series of moral values for Americans, to the learned values inherent in American culture. Renowned social psychologist Milton Rokeach defines a value as a “standard or yardstick to guide actions, attitudes, comparisons, evaluations, and justifications of self and others” (160). “To say that a person ‘has a value,’” Rokeach writes, is “to say that he (sic) has an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally and socially preferable to alternative modes of conduct or end-states of existence” (160). Johnson appealed to several national

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values documented by scholars across many disciplines. For example, in describing American values, Steele and Redding hold that “Americans like to see the world in moral terms. Acts are said to be good or bad, ethical or unethical” (85). The president leaned on the American ideals of good vs. evil, imploring his audience that America must fight poverty because it is the right thing to do, because the “good guy” would fight poverty. “Because it is right,” the president noted, “because it is wise, and because, for the first time in our history, it is possible to conquer poverty I submit, for the consideration of the Congress and the country, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964” (1964d 2).

Specifically, Johnson appealed to what Rokeach defines as “instrumental values,” beliefs that are always taken for truth (160). Johnson appealed to instrumental values by promoting the “American ideal” of life. If for no other reason, Johnson argued, the War on Poverty must we waged because it was right and decent, and therefore the American thing to do.

Johnson argued that the War on Poverty would allow all members of society, not just the upper classes, to take part in these core American principles including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He declared:

If we have our way, and if we are successful, and if the American people will heed our call, the day will come in this century when we will have won our wars—wars against poverty and illiteracy, ignorance and disease. Then think about what a great and happy land it will be when all Americans are free and when all have equal rights and all have equal privileges, and there is no discrimination because of bank accounts or churches or voter restrictions or color or sex. That is the kind of an America we look forward to (1965c 4).
Johnson spoke to his audience’s values by defining an ideal America that could come to pass only with the defeat of poverty. Poverty is presented as just another hurdle, hindering the fulfillment of America as the great society. According to the research by Steele and Redding, this tactic was well chosen for it had the potential to be effective. The authors describe a pervasive American attitude that originated in the colonial period. They write, “Action, guided by reason and an unshakeable optimism as to results, became a moral guiding principle. No problem was too complicated, no obstacle too big for determined, optimistic effort” (87). By appealing to his audience’s gratification in optimism and results, Johnson attempted to strengthen support for the cause.

The president’s argument was also strengthened by the choice of its defining metaphor, as a war dictates opposing sides. This was especially important in depicting the enemy. Zarefsky explains: “Having chosen to focus the issue on the poverty problem rather than a proposed solution the administration doggedly maintained its position, reinterpreting opposing arguments as denials of the need for action” (President Johnson’s War 35). Johnson cast the opposition as “evil,” for they apparently denied that anything should be done. Zarefsky continues, “Once the attacks had be redefined in terms of the administration’s chosen focus, it was easy to derogate them as partisan, trivial, and pernicious” (President Johnson’s War 35). Rokeach notes that once a value is accepted and internalized by the individual, it becomes the standard by which everything else is measured. Opposing arguments would now be measured against these values, making it difficult to create an argument that would not be perceived as countering these American values.
As previously discussed, Johnson made an appeal to shared values by using the war metaphor not only to create a bond between himself and his audience, but also to establish a connection between the audience and those stuck in the "prison of poverty" (1964i 2). The president attempted to strengthen the metaphor by linking it to American values. Johnson restructured the idea of poverty as an enemy just as deadly, and worthy of diligent attack, as the enemies fought in recent wars. As Steele and Redding posit, "Loyalty to the tradition and values of America, rather than undifferentiated, egocentric nationalism has been . . . a persistent pattern. Faith in American ideals means a willingness to be a good citizen, to be proud of the United States, to defend it from external aggression" (90). History demonstrates that United States citizens have been willing to fight for their independence, their rights and their pride. Johnson connected past military victories to this newest attack on poverty. "Now," he intoned, "America wins the wars that she undertakes. Make no mistake about it. And we have declared war on ignorance and illiteracy, we have declared war on poverty, we have declared war on disease, and we have declared war on tyranny and aggression. We not only stand for these things but we are willing to stand up and die for these things" (1965c 3). Johnson appealed to these values to strengthen his argument that poverty was an adversary that must be defeated by the War on Poverty. The president utilized the popular ideals of what Tom Engelhardt terms a victory culture.

In his book, The End of Victory Culture, Engelhardt describes the American fixation of victory, where in a battle of good vs. evil, good always triumphs. At the beginning of the Cold War, Americans expected wars to be won in the name of freedom and justice. Enemies were not uncommon, and their defeat was inevitable. Engelhardt
asks, “Is there an imaginable America without enemies and without the story of their
slaughter and our triumph?” (15). Beginning in elementary school, American children
regularly encounter stories of American generosity, victory, and benevolence. As a
consequence, Englehardt contends, “every child learned in school [that] our history was
an inclusive saga of expanding liberties and rights that started in a vast, fertile, nearly
empty land whose native inhabitants more or less faded away after that first
Thanksgiving” (4). As the Cold War progressed, these images and narratives began to
change. The enemy was no longer easily discerned, the “evil” hidden among the ranks of
the “good.” Engelhardt describes this new enemy as being “everywhere and nowhere,
inside and out, the postwar enemy seemed omnipresent yet impossible to target” (7).
Despite the difficulties posed, a “nightmarish search for enemy-ness became the defining,
even obsessive domestic act of the Cold War years” (7).

President Johnson utilized this periodic uncertainty to focus attention on the
domestic enemy of poverty. He adapted his rhetoric to include a specific and threatening
foe. Murray Edelman explains the significance of identifying an enemy: “Political facts
are especially vivid and memorable when the terms that denote them depict a personified
threat: an enemy, deviant, criminal or wastrel. Facts are easily ignored when they deal
with statistical probabilities involving people whose characteristics are not known” (14).
Johnson delineates a specific antagonist to give his audience something to fight against.
The definitive nature of this foe aided in the redefinition of poverty in Johnson’s rhetoric.
By targeting his audience’s need to feel victorious, Johnson aimed for total victory in an
uncertain era.
The use of the military metaphor was strategic, Zarefsky argues, because it “suggested choices about how to describe the objective, the enemy and the weapons and tactics.” Though helpful, he continues, “each also contained the seeds of its own destruction” (*President Johnson’s War* 20). Ironically, while these rhetorical strategies added initial strength to Johnson’s argument, the grandeur of the selected metaphors ultimately contributed to the demise of the War on Poverty. The growing conflict in Vietnam also interfered with the success of the military metaphors. The ambiguous figurative enemy of poverty would become secondary to the literal enemies in Vietnam. As Communication professor Kathleen Turner notes, “Domestic concerns about which Johnson cared so passionately took a back seat to the defense of the war with which he did not want to deal” (186). Schulman adds that Johnson was forced to withdraw funding from his Great Society programs in order to cover the costs of the Vietnam War. The president “believed he could protect the Great Society by downplaying the expense of his two-front war; he covered up the costs of the Asian struggle, economized on every domestic program, and delayed a tax increase as long as possible.” However, Schulman concludes, “This strategy failed. Eventually, he had to scale back the Great Society to fight the war that took up more and more of his time and energy” (101). The use of a war metaphor, though initially strategic, could not overcome the importance of an actual military conflict in Vietnam.

**Conclusion**

Patterson aptly describes the trajectory of the War on Poverty when he writes that, as “it turned out, the war on poverty eventually sputtered into a skirmish” (97). Though
there is substantial debate from historical scholars as to the effectiveness of the Johnson administration, there is little disagreement that, on the whole, the War on Poverty at best failed to meet expectations, and at worst failed completely.

The chief criticism of Johnson’s War on Poverty is the gross overreach of rhetoric without the means to support it. Johnson promised, “And I pledge to you for the years to come we are going to build together the kind of nation that [FDR] hoped for, that Harry S. Truman worked for, and that our beloved John F. Kennedy died for. We are going to build a Great Society where no man or woman is the victim of fear or poverty or hatred; where every man and woman has the chance for fulfillment and prosperity and hope” (1964L 1). Johnson embraced a challenge that his legendary predecessors were unable to meet. “Paralleling the New Deal,” political scientist Douglas R. Imig explains, “the War on Poverty was envisioned as an effective and targeted intervention that would surgically cut to the heart of the causes behind hunger and poverty in the United States” (31). Though similarly laced with good intentions, the New Deal and the War on Poverty are separated by the feasibility of the rhetoric used to articulate, and to advocate for, the policy. Of Johnson’s goal, Patterson adds “perhaps no government program in modern American history promised so much more than it delivered” (147). When analyzing contemporary criticism of the War on Poverty, Waddan notes that part “of the problem lies in the nature of the political rhetoric and the messages conveyed about what was intended and what could be achieved. ‘Great Society’ and ‘War on Poverty’ are much grander expressions which promise much more than ‘The New Deal’” (68). The name of the program alone raised the limit of expectations to astronomical heights. The promise
of an all out attack on poverty that sought annihilation of the centuries-old problem was simply more than any single administration could ever deliver.

The attitude of the administration also contributed to what Zarefsky describes as a "stalemate" in the War on Poverty. Pulitzer Prize winning author and presidential historian Doris Kearns (Goodwin) describes Johnson's attitude towards the practicality of his initiatives as naive. She states, "There could be, he believed, no fundamental or impenetrable barriers to changes that would be beneficial to all, and that everyone desired—or would desire—once they understood the purpose and the inevitable consequences of those changes" (220). Zarefsky highlights a key difficulty in launching such a rhetorically large war, when he asks, "[H]ow would one know whether or not the war had been victorious? And without such knowledge, was the War on Poverty destined to be a war without end?" (President Johnson's War 56). Johnson vaguely addressed this critical issue in his address to the Speaker of the House on "Stepping Up the War on Poverty," when he declared, "We reaffirm our faith that poverty can be eliminated from this country, and our solemn commitment to prosecute the war against poverty to a successful conclusion. For the struggle is not only for the liberation of those imprisoned in poverty, but for the conscience and the values of a prosperous and free nation" (1965a 1). The conclusion is problematic. Although the War on Poverty made strides in helping the poor, it was not a complete success; hence, given Johnson's elaborate rhetoric, it was a failure. Johnson did not advocate small victories, but large triumphs.

Kearns posits that these "gigantic aspirations—although clearly unattainable within one Presidency, or one generation—were not . . . intended merely as rhetorical exhortation. They expressed Johnson's intention to embark on a mammoth program of
social reform” (211). But even the best of intentions needed substance to ensure their evolution into policy. As Edward D. Berkowitz, professor of history, public policy and public administration at George Washington University, explains, “The War on Poverty relied on untested theory for its design and unrestrained enthusiasm for its implementation” (114). Though Johnson advocated the destruction of the cycle of poverty, providing a definitive solution proved impossible. Unfortunately, Zarefsky concludes, “No evidence was introduced, nor could any have been that the administration fully understood or knew how to deal with the cycle-of-poverty theory which it espoused” (President Johnson’s War 37). This only added to the lack of clarity when trying to determine victory.

An ill-conceived rhetorical strategy alone did not ensure the failure of the War on Poverty. Richard K. Caputo, professor social policy and research, documents an equally significant problem, a lack of funds. He notes that the OEO did not receive sufficient support to complete the tasks it was designed to do. “If all OEO money went directly to the poor as income, which most did not, each poor person in America would have received around $50 to $75 per year” (334). Also, the community action programs that were designed to aid in the war on poverty initiatives were simply spread too thin. According to Caputo, “Of the 600 poorest counties in the country (one-fifth of all counties), 215 were not covered at all by a CAP” (334). The deficiency of necessary funds limited what could actually be accomplished. Small wonder that in analyzing the failures of the War on Poverty, Jeffrey Tulis surmised in The Rhetorical Presidency that the “primary problem was to fashion a program that fit Johnson’s rhetoric while it adhered to his budget ceiling” (166).
Scholars also argue that the War on Poverty had unexpected consequences that resulted from its lack of success. Waddan notes that "critics on the right condemn it as an over-ambitious project which was not only doomed to failure but which was also bound to compound the very problems it set out to resolve" (53). The War on Poverty influenced popular opinion. Patterson explains: "By the time the war on poverty lost its political glamor [sic], its limitations had intensified the country's doubts about the ability of experts to diagnose, much less cure, the ills of the poor" (122). That skepticism is still seen in political debate in 2007.

Although Johnson's rhetoric far outstretched his means to implement policy, some scholars argue that the War on Poverty was not completely without victory. Economics scholar Nicolas Spulber, for example, contends that:

President Johnson's 'war on poverty' initiated some new programs and consolidated and expanded the coverage of some programs already on the books. These concerned: (i) human investment programs destined to increase earnings capacities (namely, compensatory education and skill training; extension of coverage of minimum wage laws); (ii) earning replacement programs designed to alleviate precipitous declines in income (unemployment insurance; disability compensation; Social Security); and (iii) provision of goods in kind and services including health care (direct in-kind programs for food; low-income housing; hospital insurance and medical care) (87).

In addition, Waddan argues that in order to analyze fully the effects of the War on Poverty, the long term impact must be considered. He notes that several of the programs started or strengthened by the administration's efforts had long-lasting effects. For
example, Johnson's policies helped to provide better health-care for several segments of the American population including the elderly and the poor (70). The program also contributed to the decreased poverty rate: 22.2 percent in 1960, to 11.7 percent in 1979. (71). Historian Robert Dallek also highlights some of the achievements of the War on Poverty: "For one, federal spending on the poor had increased in every relevant category—education and training, health, and cash benefits like social security and unemployment insurance. . . . had raised government outlays for the poor from nearly $13 billion in 1963 to almost $20 billion in 1966" (Flawed Giant 330). Though not entirely successful, the War on Poverty did have lasting political effects, in that it raised awareness for poverty, and contributed to the more intense presence of poverty as a matter of significant political debate (Caputo 335).

Although Lyndon Johnson's rhetorical strategies differed markedly from Ronald Reagan's, as becomes clear in the next chapter, the end result of their advocacy on behalf of the disadvantaged was strikingly similar. In the last week of his presidency, Johnson gave a speech summarizing his presidency. He concluded, "Now, it is time to leave. I hope it may be said, a hundred years from now, that by working together we helped to make our country more just, more just for all of its people, as well as to insure and guarantee the blessings of liberty for all of our posterity. That is what I hope. But I believe that at least it will be said that we tried" (1969 6). Almost forty years later, it is debatable whether that hope has been fulfilled. But the historical and rhetorical accounts of the War on Poverty would indicate that the latter part of his statement has been realized. There is clear evidence that, although the Johnson administration failed in its
attempts to eradicate poverty, the president's failure was not for want of an idealistic, if not unrealistic, rhetoric.
CHAPTER THREE

REAGAN REDEFINES POVERTY AND WELFARE

When Ronald Reagan entered office in 1981, America was caught in a tumultuous economic storm. Words like “unemployment,” “inflation,” and “deficit” cast dark shadows on the American dream. (Dunn, Imig, Maney) Another word that caused conservatives to cringe and prepared liberals to fight was welfare. After decades of massive effort and what was perceived as little success, Americans had grown weary of the government’s efforts to aid the impoverished. The welfare debate was as heated as it was ambiguous. Part of the challenge lay in the fact that political leaders had to determine not only how to deal with poverty, but who qualified as “truly poor.”

In order to properly address the problems of an expensive welfare program and a growing poverty population, Reagan encountered the rhetorical problem of defining controversial terms. Argumentation scholar Douglas Walton contends that people take it for granted that “terms used in legal statutes and government regulations, have an objective meaning” (122). The success of Reagan’s reform strategies depended on how both politicians and average Americans understood the reality of welfare and poverty. Reagan defined the terms of the welfare debate by attacking the War on Poverty, redefining welfare as a suffocating trap, rhetorically constructing the poverty population into two distinct entities, and dissociating both the government and the American people from the failures of the welfare system. David Zarefsky, Carol Miller-Tutzauer and
Frank E. Tutzauer summarize Reagan’s strategy of redefinition: “His behavior . . . bears out the more general aphorism that the person who can set the terms of the debate has the power to win it” (119). Reagan utilized the presidency to set the terms of the debate to redefine the War on Poverty, poverty, and welfare.

The effects of Reagan administration policy continue to unfold, though to some observers they are increasingly clear. Joseph Davey, professor of law, contends in *The New Social Contract: America’s Journey from Welfare State to Police State*, that during “the Reagan years there was a net increase in the number of people living at or below the poverty level” (49). James T. Patterson notes that Reagan’s Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 actually increased poverty by two percent. (206) This act limited assistance given to people helped by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC). Welfare scholar David Stoesz adds that because of the act, “Suddenly, AFDC family heads who were trying to improve their economic lot found that (1) they could deduct only $160 per month per child for childcare, (2) the deduction for work expenses was limited to $75 per month, and (3) the earned income disregard . . . was eliminated after four months.” This resulted in penalties to “welfare families with an adult participating in the labor market” (21).

It is clear from the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act that the rhetoric and actions of the Reagan administration are in direct contrast with each other. Instead of achieving the desired aim of getting people off the welfare rolls, these policies both increased the percentage of the population living below the poverty level and made the situations of the impoverished worse than they had been already. For example, David T. Ellwood notes that between 1976 and 1984, “welfare expenditures per poor person had
fallen dramatically—almost 30 percent per poor person on average” (41). Further, Patricia Dunn, author of “The Reagan Solution for Aiding Families With Dependent Children: Reflections of an Earlier Era,” reports, “The reductions have cut into basic food, shelter and clothing needs of desperately poor children. The administration’s proposals not only cut the disposable incomes of these families, but also reduced the rewards of work by imposing high marginal tax rates, the amount by which disposable income is reduced for each additional dollar earned” (105). The effects were evident in many aspects of life from housing to medical care, from child care to taxes. Though the effects were widespread, poor people themselves were the most affected population. In *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism*, historian Robert Dallek notes that Reagan “slowed the growth of spending on social programs for the least affluent and politically weakest members of society” (73). Programs designed to help poor Americans with little access to political power and with little voice were curtailed most sharply.

The Reagan administration also proposed substantial cuts to the Food Stamp program, cuts that yielded drastic results. According to Chester Hartman, author and Director of Research of the Poverty and Race Research Active Council, the proposed reform of food stamps would be considered income, and the recipients therefore would be taxed on it. Hartman notes, “Since poorer households get more food stamps, the move, of course, would have stuck the lowest-income households with the biggest rent increases, in absolute terms and relative to their rent-paying capacities” (258). Although such reform would “save” the government money, it failed to improve the plight of the poor. While in his rhetoric Reagan advocated for the “truly needy,” his actions proved detrimental to their economic situation. Douglas R. Imig, author of *Poverty and Power*: 57

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The Political Representation of Poor Americans notes that during “the Reagan years, recession, tax cuts, changing welfare laws, and business shifts drove increasing numbers of people into poverty, deprived them of health care, and increased their tax burden” (Imig 23). These policies increased the poverty population and made their plight more difficult.

Hartman described the attitudes of the administration: “The philosophical and practical retreat from an aggressive government role in alleviating the housing problem of those the market cannot serve has been dramatic, as evidenced by the programs the administration has abandoned and attempted to abandon” (265). The administration also attacked public housing. As a result, “the National Low Income Housing Coalition has estimated the total cuts in federal housing assistance between 1981 and 1985 at 60 percent” (Davey 45). Marjorie Hope and James Young noted, “For each dollar authorized for national defense in 1980, nineteen cents was authorized for subsidized housing programs. In 1984, only three cents was authorized for subsidized housing for each military dollar” (141). Although Reagan administration policy had devastating effects on America’s poor, those effects were hidden under the guise of protection. By providing new definitions of poverty and welfare, and by articulating the “failures” of the War on Poverty, President Reagan constructed a social reality that justified sharp cuts in government assistance to the poor.

Reagan Attacks the War on Poverty

President Reagan redefined poverty and welfare reform by juxtaposing his administration with that of past presidents, particularly Lyndon Johnson. He focused on
the shortcomings of Johnson’s’ initiatives, criticizing the War on Poverty in order to show a clear need for change. In his autobiography, *An American Life*, Reagan compares the War on Poverty to a baseball game. He writes, “The liberals had had their turn at bat in the 1960s and they had struck out” (199). In doing this, Reagan defined the reality of government involvement during the 1960s. For example, during a White House briefing he subtly referred to the War on Poverty stating, “Twenty years ago, with the best of intentions, the Federal Government began a program that it hoped would wipe out poverty in America” (1987b 2). Instead of improving the economic situation of the poor, Reagan argued, “poverty actually went up as the Federal Government spent more to eliminate it” (1987b 3). Shaping his audience’s views on the War on Poverty, or at least attempting to do so, became crucial to Reagan’s strategy as he presented his own solutions to the poverty problem. In the same speech he stated, “We have to fight the impulse of many to believe that one policy change or reform, written and implemented here in Washington, can solve the problem of poverty and welfare dependency. We know from 20 years [of] painful experience that it cannot” (1987b 3). Here the War on Poverty is not an overzealous attempt at reform but instead a government mistake that Reagan depicts as both lasting and trying.

Even in his autobiography, Reagan’s stance on social welfare is clear. He writes: “The waste in dollars and cents was small compared with the waste of human potential. It was squandered by the narcotic of giveaway programs that sapped the human spirit, diminished the incentive of people to work, destroyed families, and produced an increase in female and child poverty, deteriorating schools, and disintegrating neighborhoods”
This characterization of the centerpiece of Johnson's Great Society as counterproductive at best, and harmful at worst, is a running theme throughout his rhetoric.

There are also recurring instances in which Reagan directly used deprecating humor when discussing the War on Poverty. What he lacked in variety, he made up for in frequency. During White House briefing in May of 1987, Reagan joked, "The Federal Government does not know how to get people off of welfare and into productive lives. We had a war on poverty—poverty won" (1987d 1). This remark was followed by laughter from the audience, members of the American Legislative Exchange Council. Two years later, at a Dinner for the Knights of Malta in New York, Reagan announced, "Twenty years ago the Government declared war on poverty. Poverty won" (1989 1). In an interview with the Wall Street Journal in February of 1985, Reagan also used this "joke"—"[W]e put into effect the War on Poverty, which started in the last half of the sixties and ran through the seventies—and poverty won" (1985a 9). In a radio address a year later, he discussed the War on Poverty as if it were a humorous situation. "In 1964," he observed, "the famous War on Poverty was declared and a funny thing happened... I guess you could say, poverty won the war" (1986 1). And again in October 1985, "You know... we've gone through some recent periods here—1965 until 1980, the last year before our administration, the Great Society and the War on Poverty, which poverty won, went into effect" (1985b 2). This statement again elicited laughter from the audience, the Reagan-Bush Campaign Leadership groups. He also got a laugh out of the attendees at a fundraising luncheon for Gubernatorial candidate Jim Bunning in Kentucky: "I remember one such program that was proposed during the war on poverty—which poverty won"
Reagan trivializes the War on Poverty as a detrimental mistake of a misguided federal government.

James T. Patterson, in his book, *America's Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, summarizes the differences between Johnson and Reagan’s political agenda concerning poverty. He states, “The goal of social policy in the Johnson (and even the Nixon) years had started with the question, ‘How can we help the poor?’ Reagan, in contrast, tended to ask, ‘How can we cut costs, and how can we get people to work?’” (206). His challenge was to frame cuts in assistance to the poor as opportunities for those in need to help themselves.

The strategy in redefining the War on Poverty was not merely to compare Reagan and Johnson with Reagan being portrayed more favorably. According to Reagan’s definitions, the real reason the War on Poverty failed was not because Johnson’s rhetoric established unrealistic expectations, but rather that it was based solely on government intervention. For Reagan, this was an attack on big government as much as it was a denigration of President Johnson. The reconstruction of the War on Poverty is crucial in understanding Reagan’s rhetorical strategy. If Reagan had only attacked Johnson, then fault would be placed on the man, not the office of the presidency. Therefore, replacing Johnson would be sufficient to solve the problem. But Reagan did not leave his criticism there. Instead, he illuminated the problems of a federal government entrenched in welfare programs. This allowed him to shift his criticism seamlessly from Johnson to centralized government to the War on Poverty.

Reagan consistently attempted to redefine the War on Poverty as a colossal government failure. Central to this goal were efforts to depict poverty as the result of
government policy. Once he has defined the system—including the War on Poverty and strong government intervention—as a cause of the problem, he freed himself and his surrogates to present an alternative solution. The cornerstone of Reagan’s solution is reliance on a decentralized federal government. Reagan observed in a radio address to the nation: “We know the solutions to welfare dependency must come from States and communities, and those of us here in Washington must have the courage to let them try” (1987a 2). He emphasized the need for local and state governments to take over the poverty problem. Again making a slight dig at the War on Poverty and Johnson’s overreached rhetoric, he asked, “In looking for a solution to the poverty problem, isn’t it time Washington got a dose of humility and turned to you for help?” (1987d 2). This strategy was especially important as it subtly took responsibility away not only from the federal government, but from Reagan himself. This was the first step in Reagan’s attempt to distance himself from the poverty problem. This strategy made it possible for Reagan to redirect all responsibility onto other government organizations. If the responsibility rested with others, then he could not be blamed for any failures or consequences of new policies.

Welfare as a Trap: Reagan’s Redefinition of Government Aid

Central to Reagan’s strategy is the redefinition of welfare, which heavily focused on failures of the past. In a radio address on February 7, 1987, for instance, Reagan contended that the sad truth is that our welfare system represents one long and sorry tale of disappointment. From the 1950’s on, poverty in America was on the decline as
economic growth led millions up toward prosperity. Then, as the Federal Government began to spend billions on welfare programs, poverty stopped shrinking and actually began to grow worse. For the first time in our nation’s history, millions of Americans became virtual wards of the State, trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency that robs them of dignity and opportunity. . . . No one doubts that welfare programs were designed with the best of intentions, but neither can anyone doubt that they’ve failed—failed to boost people out of dependency” (1987a 1).

Reagan consistently defines the welfare system of Johnson and Nixon as a trap. “It’s now common knowledge that our welfare system has itself become a poverty trap—a creator and reinforcer of dependency” (1987e 1). In a panel discussion on welfare reform, he depicted a “welfare system that’s very good at keeping people poor” (1987c 1). In his description of the War on Poverty Reagan stated, “Instead of providing a ladder out of poverty, welfare became a net of dependency that held millions back” (1988 2). Where Johnson would have argued that poverty is the trap, Reagan instead placed emphasis on the debilitating effects of the welfare system in place. In a speech at a Republican Fundraising Dinner in 1981, Reagan supported his trap definition with an excerpt from an emotional letter written by an “elderly lady in New Orleans.” Focusing on race, he observed that “she was black, but she said, ‘Thank you for doing away with the war on poverty.’ She said, ‘Thank you for letting us once again try our own muscle and not become helpless dependents’” (1981c 1). These descriptions of the poor reinforce the definition of welfare as a dirty word, as something undesirable, filled with irresponsible citizens who need to wean themselves off of government support.
Reagan was not subtle in his attempts to reinforce the connotative definition of welfare. In a radio address in February 1986, he linked welfare families with unwed teenage mothers, deadbeat fathers, families deeply entrenched in laziness, and a lack of responsibility. He juxtaposed this hopeless picture with images of “normal” families, those who work hard and work together to “escape poverty and grab hold of the rungs on the ladder of opportunity” (1986 1). It is here, in the definition of welfare that Reagan begins to place distance between impoverished Americans and “normal,” hard working Americans. Reagan continued to attach a stigma to welfare recipients, and thereby discouraged those who would benefit from government support. In Poverty and Power: The Political Representation of Poor Americans, Douglas R. Imig writes, “Accepting assistance became more stigmatized as the White House led the rhetorical charge against welfare abuse” (17). Reagan equated welfare receipt with welfare abuse, and in doing so “managed to paint a picture of the Great Society as one of free handouts, particularly to the poor who seem unwilling to make a contribution in return” (Gotsch-Thomson 236). Reagan’s rhetoric equated poverty programs with handouts to a largely undeserving population, thereby enforcing the stereotypes of a fraudulent poor.

Dunn wrote during Reagan’s first term that the president and his advisors viewed poverty as a personal failure. Welfare mothers must be put to work at any sort of menial or make-work task because working is good for the character. Our economy works because people work, and lack of work leads to dependency on welfare. This philosophy is an echo of Social Darwinism which held that there is no place for such realities as unemployment, lack of training and skill, no transportation,
lack of child care, bias, discrimination, and lack of job opportunities that pay living wages (104).

Here, Reagan asserts that welfare promotes laziness and rewards inaction. Welfare supports the inept mothers, neglectful fathers and general apathy.

For Reagan, “poverty was un-American, welfare wasteful and counterproductive” (Patterson 207). Reagan’s welfare rhetoric supported this assumption and encouraged the fortification of this constructed reality. It was important for Reagan to solidify this reality, as it was necessary for his audience to agree that there was a problem. By forwarding these new definitions of welfare and poverty, Reagan controlled the way essential terms of policy-making were discussed. Here, Reagan’s reality started to focus on shifting responsibility from the government to individual people. He constructed a reality that poverty was a “personal failure,” the fateful combination of a slothful individual and an over-indulgent federal government.

This strategy also became beneficial in garnering public support. By returning consistently to the positive themes of “family” and work ethic, Reagan constructed an argument difficult to contradict. This rhetorical reality linked positive traits to welfare reform, and negative consequences to past and current systems. Historian David Farber notes that Reagan “asserted that unless people were willing to live by what they called ‘traditional family values’ and to accept that economic difficulties were the problem of the individual, not society, they were not truly Americans, and so deserved to be excluded from the body politic and punished by respectable society” (267). The fact that this perspective blatantly ignored desperate segments of the population would prove to have devastating effects.
Though President Reagan was careful to make only veiled references when reinforcing the definition of welfare as a dirty word, he offered conciliatory statements in an attempt to appear as though he rejected the typical stereotypes. Like Johnson, Reagan acknowledged prevailing attitudes concerning the poor. He candidly stated, “From dealing as a Governor closer at hand with welfare, and *those people*, I think truly that the bulk of the people on welfare aren’t just lazy bums or cheaters—they want nothing more than to be independent, free of the social workers, and out on their own once again” (emphasis added 1987b 4). Though this statement contrasted directly with much of his other rhetoric, it allowed him to continue to promote his workfare ideals by associating it with positive characteristics.

The Solution: Protecting the Truly Needy

In February of 1981, Reagan revealed his plans for reinvigorating the economy. One of his first goals was to decrease government spending. After describing the steps that needed to be taken, and the budget cuts that would result from this economic overhaul, Reagan reassured the country that “Our spending cuts will not be at the expense of the truly needy. We will, however, seek to eliminate benefits to those who are not really qualified by reason of need” (1981a 4). David Zarefsky, Carol Miller-Tutzauer, and Frank E. Tutzauer argue in their article, “Reagan’s Safety Net for the Truly Needy: The Rhetorical Uses of Definition,” that the “adjective ‘truly’ is a good signal that the noun it modifies has been dissociated” (114). The authors draw upon the research of Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca to discern and apply the rhetorical strategy of dissociation.

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Dissociation functions, they explain, as a means to separate a "unitary concept" into two distinct parts, "pairing it with two philosophically opposed terms, one of which is a value to be preferred over the other" (114). The rhetor then creates a link between the more favorable term and the view that is being forwarded in the argument. The same is done with the unfavorable term and the idea in contrast to that of the rhetor's.

Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauer explain that by emphasizing "truly" in the phrase "truly needy," Reagan created clear dissociation between two types of need in America. The first kind of need the authors describe as "apparent" or "fraudulent" need. This need is in direct contrast to the "truly needy," the segment of the poverty population that Reagan describes as deserving of federal aid. By dissociating the word "needy" Reagan rhetorically constructs two very different populations: the "truly needy" who are thereby entitled to government benefits, and the "apparent needy" who he argues have been irresponsible, wasting government resources and Americans' tax dollars.

Through dissociation, Reagan rationalized severe budget cuts while simultaneously contending that the deserving poor would be accommodated. The introduction of the "truly needy" as a social class was strategic in gaining the approval both of his supporters and his opponents. As Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauer note, "Not only has Reagan not repudiated the government's historic commitment to help those in need, he has reaffirmed it—adding only the innocuous proviso that the need must be for real" (114). This classification of the "truly needy," despite its apparent clarity, is strategically ambiguous.

Although perhaps initially beneficial, this became problematic as Reagan offered no standards or system of measurement to determine who exactly the "truly needy" were.
In fact, after this speech “media attention focused on the fuzziness of the phrase. In the immediate aftermath of the speech, one widespread reaction was that the President needed to be more precise about his plans” (Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauser 114). Furthermore, Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauser argue that as his term progressed, Reagan’s policies made it increasingly more difficult to be classified as “truly needy.” In part, Reagan’s reassurance that the “truly needy” would be taken care of stemmed from his commitment to a “safety net” of government programs.

This “safety net” would serve as a means of protecting the “truly needy” and ensuring that all deserving members of society would be able to rely on government support. The existence of a rhetorical “safety net” was meant to assuage the fears of those who were concerned that drastic cuts to social programs would deprive the “truly needy” of deserved basic assistance.

Reagan’s continued reclassification of the “truly needy” was not without repercussions. Because it became harder to be classified as “truly needy,” fewer people qualified to take advantage of government support, thus the number of recipients eligible to be caught by the “safety net” declined sharply. Imig notes that “Tighter eligibility requirements meant decreasing rates of participation in federal programs despite increasing poverty rates” (19). Because of this, “Almost all families with earnings of any kind were denied AFDC (Aid to families with Dependent Children) and related support, including heath benefits. Moreover, social-service agencies lost their outreach budgets and faced stiff penalties for overpayments, undermining their willingness to extend benefits” (19). Although Reagan spoke of allowing the states to exercise “creativity” and “freedom” in solving the poverty problem, his administration continued to watch over the
state governments’ shoulders. Imig writes, “Strict penalties were enacted for states with enrollment errors above 4 percent” (20). This seemingly minor action yielded skepticism and fear among states. So much so, Imig continues, that “already-harried departments of social services became extremely uneasy about extending benefits to new applicants” (20). These initiatives, designed to decrease wasteful government spending, had detrimental effects on agencies in compliance with government regulations and left many families worse off than before.

Sustained criticism accompanied Reagan’s assurances that administration policy would protect the “truly needy.” Anthony Champagne and Edward J. Harpham state in the introduction to their analysis of *The Attack on the Welfare State*, that “conservative rhetoric clearly departs from reality when it claims that the proposed cutbacks are aimed at only removing the ‘haves’ from various welfare programs while continuing to help the ‘truly needy’ through a social safety net” (2). Declaring a segment of the population “truly needy” eliminates aid to a large portion of the culture of poverty.

Reagan’s clear division of the truly needy from the dependent needy is ironic considering the context of the times. David Stoesz notes in *A Poverty of Imagination: Bootstrap Capitalism, Sequel to Welfare Reform*, for example, that the “1980s were particularly punishing for poor families” (21). As economic conditions continued to worsen, more and more Americans were entering the community of poverty. Reagan’s initiatives, designed to help the “truly needy,” ignored this descending segment of the population. As Imig notes, “Fewer services were available to increasing numbers of poor people. Particularly hard hit were the recent additions to the poverty rolls and those approaching the poverty line. These groups were excluded from food stamps, AFDC,
and the school-lunch program” (16). In other words, much of the “reform” not only ignored many of America’s impoverished, it added to the poverty population. “Long-term poverty,” Imig writes, “increased as low-income people were forced into deeper destitution before qualifying for assistance” (17). In addition, the “truly needy” were also often excluded from proper medical care under Reagan’s reforms. Champagne and Harpham explain: “Not surprisingly those who have suffered the most from the major cuts in health care financing have been those who could be considered ‘truly needy’” (4).

Despite substantial commentary on the flaws in the administration’s depiction of the “truly needy,” such appeals continued to define Reagan’s rhetoric throughout his presidential tenure.

The effects of Reagan administration “reforms” extended beyond recipients of housing support and food stamps to other marginalized members of society. Champagne and Harpham, for instance, discussed Reagan’s attack on disability programs. Similar to welfare, significant numbers of the deserving poor did not qualify for assistance under the administration’s new standards. The administration, the authors note, used “existing laws and the administrative process to remove thousands from disability rolls and to make it very difficult for thousands of others to get on them. The political and human costs of this attack on the disability program have been high” (4). This is in direct contrast to Reagan’s statement in February 1981 when he reassured those concerned that “We will continue to fulfill the obligations that spring from your national conscience. . . . Those who, through no fault of their own, must depend on the rest of us—the poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need—can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts” (1981b 2). Despite such
declarations, however, Reagan’s initiatives made it difficult even for disabled Americans to meet the criteria that defined the “truly needy.” With no explicit or precise definition of this pivotal term in place, those in need of assistance had little legal recourse when attempting to determine their eligibility for support.

The persuasive power of this strategy can be explained by the social construction of reality and the power of definition. Edward Schiappa notes in his book, Defining Reality, that publics “must be persuaded to agree; such persuasion may be simple and direct or complicated and time-consuming” (30). At first, Reagan had to lay out his definitions of both poverty and welfare, and to do so carefully, systematically and repeatedly. Once the American people were introduced to terms including “safety net” and “truly needy,” and once those definitions were recognized, Reagan could continue. He had to construct a reality for his audience that included the unwavering confidence that the administration’s policies would not harm the “truly needy.” Once this reality was accepted, simple reference to the government’s efforts to alleviate the problems of the poor would inspire confidence in government policy. The “truly needy” became a standard refrain designed to provide the illusion of a carefully constructed definition of the population that would benefit from revisions of entitlement programs. The absence of formal, concrete definitions of key terms enabled Reagan to succeed with a balancing act; he appeared at once to support essential programs for the poor, while simultaneously curtailing funds for social support programs. Once they were convinced that Reagan had no intention of harming the “truly needy,” the American public proved receptive to what might be termed an early form of “compassionate conservatism.” The strategic ambiguity of “the truly needy” thus made the absence of a strict definition acceptable,
and relieved the president of any responsibility for articulating, defining, or explaining clear-cut terms or policy criteria.

Critical to the acceptance of the idea of the "truly needy" is the existence of the non-needy. Acknowledgment that there were genuinely poor and needy people in the United States served also to confirm that there were other citizens abusing the system. Reagan disassociated the two groups, and placed the American people among those who would defend the "truly needy." Reagan's rhetorical strategy of identification is consistently clear in this regard. Identification occurs when a persuader shows an audience that the beliefs or values they share are more important than the ways in which they might differ. Kenneth Burke describes identification as follows: "A is not identical with his (sic) colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (20). Burke continues, "In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (21). Reagan sought to employ identification to unite his diverse audience in support of the "truly needy." Identification joins people together, uniting them based on at least one commonality, even if apart from that they are very different. Reagan linked his audience to the "truly needy," but also critically against the "abusers" of the welfare system, thus creating a clear "us" against the indolent and fraudulent "non-needy."

Robert Asen, author of Visions of Poverty, describes Reagan's explicit use of identification. "The president allied the American people, the individual worker, the
business operator, American industry, and himself against the non-needy recipients, politicians and bureaucrats” (22). At the center of this rhetoric is the defense of the government budget, emphasizing that there was a threat to the economic security of the country in the form of lazy, undeserving welfare recipients. Political scientist Ardith L. Maney explains that, “Part of the success of the president and his allies came because they had tapped into popular attitudes about fraud, waste, and abuse that seem to be permanently attached to means-tested social programs in the United States” (139). As suppliers of government funds through tax dollars, middle- and upper-class Americans could find comfort in Reagan’s assertions that the waste would not continue. In an era of economic insecurity, potential threats to American financial security would be taken seriously.

The president constantly reassured taxpayers: “My friends, I believe we’re too great a nation, too generous of heart, too bold in finding solutions, to permit waste of lives and money to continue” (1987a 1). Fortunately for Reagan, his assurances to taxpayers were substantiated with real numbers. According to Imig, “During the course of the Reagan presidency, median family income rose by 7.5 percent while poverty remained high” (23). Reagan utilized identification strategies to gain the support of Americans who were concerned about their money being spent frivolously. He united his audience by attributing to them such flattering characteristics as “great,” “generous,” and “bold.” In doing so, he gained support for his goal of curtailing government entitlement programs. Given that Americans were great, generous and bold, according to Reagan, surely they could be trusted to enact their own welfare programs within their state and local governments. Similarly, by imbuing the American public with habits of enterprise
and self-help, Reagan implicitly argued that responsibility for combating and overcoming undesirable circumstances lay with the individual. Reagan demonstrated that by refusing to be “great,” America’s poor bore responsibility for their failure to join the ranks of other Americans who were rising with the economic tide.

Reagan proposed a welfare reform program that would be headed not by the federal government, but by state and local agencies. Asen describes Reagan’s attitude: “The problem facing the country was that [the federal] government had transgressed its proper boundaries” (74). In his 1980 campaign, “Reagan sought to bring government under control by reducing or eliminating programs that wasted taxpayer money and by lowering tax rates that produced economic stagnation” (Asen 75). He was clear to advance the argument that successful welfare reform would have to come in a form more consistent with Nixon’s workfare rather than Johnson’s welfare. In The Politics of Social Welfare: The Collapse of the Centre and the Rise of the Right, author Alex Waddan maintains that, “Reagan very clearly denounced the social policies of the Great Society, accusing them of fostering dependency by moving away from the hand-up ethic and encouraging a hand-out ethic” (84). Reagan defined state run assistance as a hand up or aid out of poverty, which contrasted sharply with the hand-out approach characteristic of federal aid generally, and the War on Poverty in particular. Reagan argued that under Johnson in the 1960s, “too many people became dependent on government payments and lost the moral strength that has always given the poor the determination to climb America’s ladder of opportunity” (1989 1). Here he reverts back to his trap metaphor that was integral to his 1987 speeches, in which he defined not poverty, but welfare as the trap, keeping America’s poor caught in a cycle of dependency. All the poor needed was a
little determination, a little ambition, and less federal intervention to escape from the trap of the welfare system. There is a clear and specific emphasis placed on the need for work. Reagan stated: “Now, all of us care about the poor, and all of us want to see the tragedy that is poverty ended. So, let’s get to work” (1987b 4). This statement comes after an argument in the same speech for reducing the number of people on the welfare rolls. Reagan here advanced a subtle argument for a work-centered relief program.

Us vs. Them: Reagan’s Strategy of Dissociation

All of Reagan’s rhetorical strategies—attacking the War on Poverty, redefining welfare, and constructing the “truly needy”—allowed Reagan to utilize the divisive function of identification. Burke explains this function: “Because to begin with ‘identification’ is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of division” (22). Further, Burke forwards, “Identification is compensatory to division” (182). As a persuader identifies with an audience, showing them what they are, s/he is simultaneously showing what they are not. “To be attracted to one view,” Gerard Hauser maintains, “implies that you forgo its opposing views” (214). Consistent with the analysis of Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauer, Schiappa defines this effort as dissociation, “an arguer’s effort to break up a previously unified idea into two concepts, one that will be positively valued by the target audience and one that will be negatively valued” (36). He explains that the two concepts are set up in philosophical pairs, “one of which is usually considered metaphysically, epistemologically, or ethically superior to the other” (36). To demonstrate previous efforts as unsuccessful, Reagan depicted the War on Poverty as a failure, as a joke, as unnecessary government expenditure. He
created a reality for his audience, describing Johnson's efforts as the inferior attempts of a well-meaning politician. In doing so, he cast his own initiatives as decidedly different from, and superior to, Johnson's. To Reagan, the differences are black and white: one approach to poverty is good, one is bad; one helps the poor, one hurts the poor.

Similarly, Reagan's redefinition of welfare helped to solidify this dissociation. Here, the separation is emphasized as welfare is painted as undesirable, suffocating, and often reserved for the country's laziest and least ambitious citizens. This strategy allowed Reagan to dissociate his audience's concern for the poor from their financial interests. He defined part of the poverty population as deserving, as "truly needy," while a significant number lived frivolously, cheating the taxpayer. Reagan utilized dissociation to unite his audience against the "non-needy," while still assuaging the collective conscience by pledging that the legitimate needs of the "truly needy" will be met. Through dissociation, Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer and Tutzauer conclude, not "only has Reagan not repudiated the government's historic commitment to help those in need, he has reaffirmed it—adding only the innocuous proviso that the need must be for real" (114).

Lastly, Reagan's strategy of dissociation is evident in his rhetoric of federal versus state governments. He left no question as to which is superior in terms of the welfare debate. He labeled state government as a creative outlet for welfare reform. He defined the federal government's numerous welfare assistance programs as unnecessary interference. Michael Billig elaborates on the strategy of division: "The out-group—the implied 'they' who oppose 'us'—are rhetorically depicted not merely as the opponents of 'us' but also as the opponents of universal principles with which 'we' have identified

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ourselves and our audience” (238). Reagan juxtaposed the failing welfare system with its fiscally irresponsible initiatives and lazy recipients against a new state driven assistance program and the hard working Americans determined to rise out of poverty on their own. He drew a clear line between two alternatives. But there was really no choice in this dichotomy. Either his audience was on the side of a decentralized government committed to helping only the “truly needy,” or they supported the non-needy Americans taking advantage of a bloated federal government.

The End Result

Patterson explains that while some liberals villanized Reagan unfairly, “critics were correct in perceiving the president as no friend of a generous public assistance state” (205). Reagan placed himself far away from the ideals of the Great Society not only in his rhetoric, but also in his policies. Davey explains, “Reagan’s first term saw an all-out assault on programs for the poor” (45). According to Patterson, Reagan’s alterations to welfare were so severe that “his proposed cuts in social programs were roughly twice as large as those ultimately accepted by Congress” (206). Iceland writes that the 1980s were overtaken by pessimistic attitudes that chipped away at the optimism of the 1960s concerning poverty and welfare reform. Evidence of this lies in Reagan’s treatment of both the federal budget and the states’ responsibilities. John Iceland notes, “Under Reagan, military budgets were expanded and taxes cut, as were some social programs. . . . [S]pending on others, such as . . . child care, unemployment insurance, food stamps, subsidized housing, public and mental health services, legal and was slashed” (125). These cuts, according to Iceland, “coincided with perhaps the worst recession since the
1930s" (125). Further, Iceland contends, during Reagan’s administration, unemployment and poverty rates leaped to their highest points in years.

Despite this data, Reagan still maintains credit for the “success” of the programs, primarily because of a shift towards a decentralized approach to welfare reform. He began a radio address to the nation in August 1987 by declaring, “Americans always have cared about the less fortunate, and I’m sure it’ll deeply gladden the hearts of many of you to know the kind of progress we’ve made during the past 6-1/2 years in helping the poor” (1987e 1). In an effort to prove the success of his programs, Reagan often touted the addition of new jobs as a triumph of his administration. However, according to Davey, the quality of the jobs has been greatly inflated. He states, “It has been responsibly estimated that 44 percent of the new jobs created during Reagan’s two administrations paid poverty-level wages, compared to less than 20 percent of the new jobs that were created during the preceding two decades” (48). Even the new jobs the Reagan administration introduced added to the growing poverty population. Dallek describes Reagan’s politics as focusing on “shadow victories [that ignore] economic realities” (72). In a 1987 radio address Reagan characterized the success of his administration by declaring, “We have between 4 and 6 million fewer low-income families on the Federal income tax rolls” (1987e 1). They may have been off of the welfare rolls, but that was no indication of their economic status; and as Dallek explains, many had moved from welfare roles to be counted among the working poor in yet another instance of the president rhetorically shrinking the safety net.

Dallek discusses the administration’s constructed reality. “The consequences of the reductions do not register clearly on Reagan and the advocates of his ideas because
their attention focuses almost exclusively on the psychologically satisfying assault on government power. They either ignore or deny the results of their actions by thoughtlessly repeating unrealistic clichés about the role of private, voluntary philanthropy” (90). All of this was justified, according to Reagan, because administration policy continued to provide for the country’s “truly needy.” Dallek interprets the evidence differently. He contends Reagan’s initiatives, “have done serious injury to domestic social programs and have caused significant suffering for the poor. But for Reagan, who denies these realities, actual political and economic changes are secondary to the fact that advocates of ‘correct’ thinking or conservative ideas are in positions of power, where they can speak for old values and honor their constituents’ views” (73). An integral part of Reagan’s constructed reality was altering public perception of the current situation of the impoverished. By creating the “safety net,” Reagan forwarded his own position on welfare reform, regardless of the social and economic consequences.

Conclusion

The inherent ambiguity of the term poverty is what allows it to be defined and redefined with every new administration. Poverty is not easily defined, not a matter of black and white. In America especially, a person often cannot be classified as poor by a cursory look. Poverty in America is hidden, it can be covered up, it has easy and readily available disguises. Michael Harrington argues that the poor are invisible. They are grouped together in slums or dispersed in the country, invisible from middle class suburbia. They are on the “other side of the tracks.” Even when a member of the lower
class manages to enter the line of sight of middle America, their problems are still invisible, hidden by their clothes. Clothing is a disguise for the poor—cheap clothing and hand me downs are not hard to come by. Harrington states, "it seems as if the affluent society had given out costumes to the poor so that they would not offend the rest of society with the sight of rags" (5). The poor are also hidden behind nature—the rural poor are hidden by large corporate farms, the mountain poor are hidden behind the stately Appalachians, and the migrant poor are hidden by vast fields of plenty. The poor are politically invisible, they have no representation in the government. This vagueness and invisibility leaves poverty open to interpretation and political debate.

The Reagan presidency comprises a strong case in point of constructed reality. The president’s supporters paint a picture of the Reagan years as an age of economic prosperity and growth; as the tide rose, they argue, everyone rose with it. And in truth, for some Americans, the economy was flourishing, and people from many walks of life saw an improved quality of life. Research independent of this perspective, however, constructs a reality in stark contrast to that of luxurious yachts rising on the strong economic tide. Davey counters this notion, for instance, when he notes that changes "in the distribution of income during the Reagan years would have had no impact on homelessness if, in fact, ‘the rising tide’ had raised all boats. But the relentless decrease in disposable income by those at the bottom of the income ladder, coupled with the shrinking stock of federally subsidized low-income housing, had to result in an increase in homelessness" (49). Imig adds that between “1979 and 1989 the income of the poorest fifth of the country actually decreased by 2.1 percent while that of the next poorest fifth remained virtually unchanged. Meanwhile, the upper middle class gained 10.6 percent in
income and the richest fifth of the country experienced income growth of 20.4 percent” (23). He adds: “A decade of redistribution has meant that the richest 2.5 million Americans, 1 percent of the population, [had] nearly as much income as the poorest 40 percent of the country” (24). Mike Davis reported that according the Congressional Budge Office, between 1980 and 1984, the poor “lost at least $23 billion in income and federal benefits, while high-income families have gained more than $35 billion” (234). Conservative commentator and pollster Kevin Phillips adds, “By the middle of Reagan’s second term, official data had begun to show that America’s broadly defined ‘rich’—the top half of 1 percent of the U.S. population—had never been richer” (8).

There was not only an increase in homelessness, but an increase in the poverty population, and an increase of people who were in fact, “truly needy.” But Reagan constructed a different reality, a reality in which Americans could rely on their country for help, as long as that help was “deserved.” Reagan’s reality consisted of moderately poor families who just needed a little push to get out of poverty. In Reagan’s reality this push could help propel them up the economic ladder to middle class comforts and beyond.

Ironically, Reagan’s critical characterization of the War on Poverty during a radio address in 1986, is in fact an accurate representation of his own policies. He reported, “In 1964 the famous War on Poverty was declared and a funny thing happened. Poverty, as measured by dependency, stopped shrinking and then actually began to grow worse. I guess you could say, poverty won the war. Poverty won in part because instead of helping the poor, government programs ruptured the bonds holding poor families
together” (2/15/86). Though Reagan’s approach to poverty was the polar opposite of Johnson’s the end result was the same—poverty still won.

Though poverty was the clear victor, Reagan won the rhetorical battle. By redefining poverty, welfare and the Great Society programs, Reagan convinced the American people that the poverty problem was being taken care of. Fears were assuaged and consciences were soothed, but the financial realities remained unchanged. Murray Edelman observes that though “poverty and many other serious problems are obviously chronic, the language in which officials and the general public routinely discuss them focuses attention on the formal goal of overcoming them and masks many of the results of public policies” (141). He posits that this leads to “both the powerful and the powerless to accept their situations while permitting both to express their abhorrence of poverty and their dedication to reform” (142). The result, Edelman argues, is that the public continues to support the existing policies, “regardless of their empirical consequences” (142). The power of definition and rhetorical construction of reality can be clearly seen in Reagan’s poverty rhetoric. The American people accepted a reassuring reality, while blatantly ignoring the actual reality of America’s poor. Thus, it is the power of the rhetoric, of the reality, that was paramount. In this case, the actual results were inconsequential, it was less important that the issue was resolved, and more important that the public bought into, and was pacified by, Reagan’s reality.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION: TWO INCOMPATIBLE REALITIES

The preceding chapters critically examined Lyndon Johnson’s anti-poverty rhetoric and Ronald Reagan’s welfare discourse. Johnson reinvigorated the welfare debate in the 1960s by declaring his War on Poverty. Seventeen years later, Reagan brought comfort to a country in economic turmoil by assuring Americans that the federal government would never desert the “truly needy.” The case studies reflect how two presidents constructed—or at least operated from—different social realities in addressing the government’s responsibility to the poor.

Current scholarship on theories of poverty continues to address the divergent approaches reflected in the two presidential assessments of that responsibility. In *American Poverty in a New Era of Reform*, Harrell R. Rodgers, Jr., offers insight into the two views represented by Johnson and Reagan. Rodgers delineates two distinct theories of poverty, the cultural/behavioral and structural/economic. The cultural/behavioral interpretation holds that “the real cause of poverty is the behavior, values, and culture of the poor” (63). In Reagan’s rhetoric, the cultural/behavioral perspective is prominent. Reagan defines the reality of the poor as the result of personal apathy, or lack of personal drive. In Reagan’s reality, many of the impoverished are that way by choice, not because they need assistance to rise out of poverty. Likewise, the “cultural/behavioral approach,”
Rodgers explains, “places responsibility for America’s poverty problem on the personal inadequacies of the poor, welfare in general, or the design flaws of welfare programs” (67). In following with this approach, Reagan removed responsibility from the federal government, and deflected it onto the poor themselves. As discussed earlier, Reagan reinforced the perception of welfare as a “dirty” word, and its recipients as indolent and apathetic. He then unified his audience under the “American values” of hard work and determination. Historian James T. Patterson notes the significance of this tactic when he observes, “Reagan’s appeal rested ultimately on his celebration of time-honored American values—the work ethic, rugged individualism, and hostility to public ‘handouts’” (207). Within the cultural/behavioral approach, a solid work ethic coupled with determination would be all the hand-up an American would need to escape from poverty.

As previously discussed, Reagan trivialized the War on Poverty, often using it as an example of misguided thinking by the Johnson administration. Reagan acknowledged the challenges that the cycle of poverty posed to welfare programs. But instead of government aid being a solution to the problem, Reagan argued, welfare only ensured that people remained caught in the vicious cycle. The president’s discourse reinforced a reality in which the poor consisted of drunken vagrants, promiscuous women, and juvenile delinquents. These harsh substantive descriptions were countered with sympathetic tones, designed to demonstrate his compassion for the “truly needy.”

“Journalists and politicians,” wrote the late scholar of presidential rhetoric, Theodore Windt, “frequently wish to draw metaphysical distinctions between rhetoric and reality, as if the former is false or misleading, while the latter is true and accurate”
(xvii). But as we have seen, the former is often the more important of the two. The facts of poverty during the Reagan administration are clear. Despite “three recessions,” Rodgers notes, “the rate of poverty declined significantly during the 1960s and 1970s.” But by “the early 1980s,” he continues, “the rate of poverty was increasing” (27).

Historians also note that Reagan’s tax cuts had serious long-term consequences. “Reagan’s belief was the tax cuts would stimulate the economy, producing more, not less, revenues. Time proved Reagan wrong. The result of Reagan’s tax and spending policies was the largest deficits in the nation’s history” (Rodgers 85). The reality proved to be quite different from Reagan’s rhetoric.

Reagan insisted that the fundamental American values of hard work and dedication should be enough to boost people out of the culture of poverty, without requiring the assistance of federal welfare programs. Here, again, redefinition was central to his argument. “By early 1985 nearly 14 million children (22 percent of all American children) lived in families with incomes below the poverty line. They made up nearly 40 percent of the total poverty population” (Patterson 212). It would be difficult to argue that this large portion of the poverty population could change their situation through increased ambition and a stronger work ethic. Nevertheless, Reagan continued to assure his national audience that his administration was committed to assisting those who “truly” could not help themselves. As Rodgers notes, such assurances were not consistent with the data: “Poverty increased dramatically during the Reagan years, but Reagan argued that welfare programs were to blame, not his economic polices” (85). Rhetoric allowed the president to describe a social reality in which welfare programs only exacerbated the cycle of poverty, the social ill they were ostensibly designed to combat.

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In contrast to the cultural/behavioral view, structural or economic theories “usually contain some behavioral component, but argue the precipitating cause of poverty is a lack of equal opportunities (high unemployment or sub employment), educational systems that disadvantage the poor, or discrimination in its various forms” (Rodgers 63). Analyzing Johnson’s rhetoric, a clear structural/economic theme emerges. Johnson championed his welfare programs as instruments essential to the destruction of the cycle of poverty. He emphasized members of the poor population who wanted to work and to succeed, but could not because of physical, mental, or economic constraints. The only solution, Johnson insisted, was front-line government intervention.

Johnson capitalized on the rediscovery of poverty in the early 1960s, which fostered public discussion of an often hidden problem. *Time* magazine, for instance, featured an article in 1965 that depicted the devastating truth of America’s poor. The article offered a frank discussion that put poverty in a new perspective:

The reality of the new poverty lies in its contrast to U.S. affluence, and it is heightened by the constant, often self-congratulatory talk about that affluence. . . . It is the poverty of people who have a refrigerator, assert their right to own a TV set, may genuinely need a car, should visit a dentist. Even if this poverty is not like any earlier poverty or the poverty of much of the rest of the world, it is worth declaring a war on. (“The Poor” 1)

But even today, over 40 years later, the war has yet to be won. As with Reagan, here the rhetoric and the reality are not compatible. The rhetoric of the War on Poverty promised an attack on one of the country’s most debilitating problems, an attack that assured
complete and total victory. This resulted in an increased skepticism of the possible success of the initiatives. “By the time the war on poverty lost its political glamour, its limitations had intensified the country’s doubts about the ability of experts to diagnose, much less cure, the ills of the poor” (Patterson 122). Johnson’s rhetoric promised an impossible feat, thereby all but guaranteeing inconsistencies between rhetoric and reality.

The transition from Johnson’s War on Poverty to Reagan’s Safety Net, might be traced to Richard Nixon’s discourse on poverty and welfare. In his “Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs,” delivered August 8, 1969, Nixon emphasized the responsibilities of the poor in fighting poverty, the government’s role in assisting the poor, and how the two must work together. Nixon stated that his plans for reform aimed “at getting everyone able to work off welfare rolls and onto payrolls” (2). This emphasis on self-sufficiency continued throughout his speech. Nixon paved the way for Reagan to criticize the War on Poverty by cataloging the failures of past administrations, calling Washington “a bureaucratic monstrosity, cumbersome, unresponsive, ineffective” (1). His most severe criticism came in his discussion of the country’s poor. “Nowhere,” he asserted, “has the failure of government been more tragically apparent than in its efforts to help the poor and especially in its system of public welfare” (1). Nixon did not completely reject Johnson’s philosophies; instead, he outlined the importance of a working welfare system: “The present system often makes it possible to receive more money on welfare than on a low-paying job” (3). This he stated, is “morally wrong” for a “family that is working to try to make ends meet to receive less than a family across the street on welfare” (3). Nixon laid the foundation for Reagan to shift away from a reality of a culture of poverty, and towards a reality of a debilitating welfare system.
That Nixon's rhetoric served as a precursor to Reagan's argument is evident, further, in Patterson's analysis of a key difference in Johnson's and Reagan's attitudes. He writes that the "goal of social policy in the Johnson years had started with the question, 'How can we help the poor?' Reagan, in contrast, tended to ask, 'How can we cut costs, and how can we get people to work?"' (206). The differences in the constructed realities complement Rodgers' research, specifically his observation that "conservatives favor cultural/behavioral arguments, while moderates and liberals usually stress structural/economic explanations that contain a behavioral component" (63). Regardless of the original positions of the presidents, the end result was the same. Both presidents' rhetoric fell significantly short of the constructed reality.

Presidential Rhetoric: the Power of Definition

Theodore Windt described the importance and necessity of strong presidential rhetoric both for issues of public policy and for the sustaining government. "It can be persuasively argued," he writes, "that without this presidential role as opinion leader for the nation, the Republic would actually be in grave danger. If the presidency had remained passive and inarticulate, the vaunted dispersion of the power to govern might long since have destroyed the system itself" (7). It has long since been accepted that presidential rhetoric is an essential element of the office, and Americans now expect to hear speeches from their president on a constant basis. In contrast to the nineteenth century, it is no longer surprising to hear a subject like poverty discussed authoritatively by the president.
David Zarefsky explains that presidential rhetoric includes “decisions about how to explain ambiguous situations, so that they may be taken as evidence for one’s point of view rather than the opposite” (5). As previously discussed, defining reality was critical to the acceptance of the presidents’ policies. Johnson described the ambiguous situation of poverty as an enemy that threatened America’s economy, population, and children. By advancing this definition of poverty as a vicious cycle, Johnson dismissed the theory that poverty was the result of laziness.

Reagan, in contrast, chose to downsize the poverty population, labeling the larger segment of the poor as taking advantage of a benevolent government, and deeming only a small segment of the poor as worthy of tax payer dollars. In doing so, Reagan contradicted Johnson’s arguments that poverty was a nation-wide epidemic; he defined it instead as a localized, minor problem. Both presidents delineated a clear enemy. Johnson’s enemy was poverty, Reagan’s was the laziness and apathy that seemed to plague America’s poor.

The rhetoric of poverty and welfare reform offers a case study in the power of presidential rhetoric. Murray Edelman observes, “Though poverty and many other serious problems are obviously chronic, the language in which officials and the general public routinely discuss them focuses attention on the formal goal of overcoming them and masks many of the results of public policies” (141). The rhetoric of Johnson and Reagan alike focused on the goal of overcoming poverty. Johnson championed a full-fledged War on Poverty, a lofty goal that scholars agree contributed to the ultimate failure of his efforts to help the poor.
Zarefsky describes Johnson’s fatal flaw in the War on Poverty: “His programs were measured not against what the conditions had been before he began but against the vision which his own rhetoric had proclaimed” (204). It is arguably impossible for any single administration to destroy completely the “enemy” of poverty, but Johnson focused his rhetoric exclusively on this idea. As a consequence, Zarefsky writes, Johnson faced an intractable dilemma: “Excessively forceful symbolic choices could not be sustained in incrementalist action, but forceful symbolic choices might well have been ineffective in arousing a latent public in the first place” (204). Had Johnson not taken this approach, it likely would have been even more difficult to gain public interest; yet by declaring war, Johnson ultimately assured his own failure. In the end, the progress made in combating poverty was deemed insignificant when compared to the original goal.

In contrast to the shortcomings of LBJ’s strategy and tactics, Reagan aimed in his rhetoric to convince the American people that the poverty problem was not a national epidemic, but a localized nuisance that could be dealt with swiftly, without substantial federal government intervention. To gain the support of his audience, Reagan’s rhetoric ensured that the “truly needy” would never fall through an essential “safety net.” This designation rhetorically minimized the poverty problem and dismissed millions of Americans in need.

The War Continues: Poverty in Contemporary Political Rhetoric

Scholarship in presidential rhetoric remains a vibrant and fruitful pursuit. Within that pursuit, it remains important to continue to develop sustained analyses of poverty and
welfare discourse within the genre of presidential communication. Recent statistics reveal the necessity for such study. Rodgers explains: “In 2003, the federal government estimated that almost 36 million Americans were poor, over 12 percent of the population. To put this number in perspective, the collective poverty population in 2003 was almost as large as the total population of California, twice the size of the population of Florida, and several million larger than the entire population of Canada” (4). That number increased in 2005; the estimate grew to 37 million Americans, or close to 13% of the population (Nilsen 5). Most recently, in 2007 Thomas J. Billitteri, Director of Communications for the Aspen Institute, wrote that despite “a relatively stable economy, an overhaul of the welfare system a decade ago and billions spent on programs for the needy, poverty remains pervasive and intractable across the nation” (2). In addition to the clear need to analyze the power of definition in presidential speech, two principles urge the study of rhetoric concerning poverty in the early twenty-first century.

First, political pundits agree that the issue of poverty and welfare reform is prevalent in campaign rhetoric for the 2008 election. According to Billitteri, in the 2008 presidential race, Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., has accused the Bush administration of making the middle class and working families into “invisible Americans,” while Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., alluding to his work as a community organizer in Chicago, has said poverty “is the cause that led me to a life of public service.” Former Sen. John Edwards, D-N.C., has staked his campaign on the poverty issue, calling it “the great moral issue of our time.” (4). Candidate debates, campaign oratory, media coverage, and public discussion is highly likely to continue to attend to poverty as a political issue. As such, rhetorical critics must
be prepared to turn a critical eye to the way this new group of presidential hopefuls define the problem, construct competing realities, and pledge to create workable remedies.

Second, scholars across many disciplines agree that developing and implementing policies that curtail poverty will have lasting effects on the American economy. Rodgers writes, for instance, that effective “social welfare programs should also be able to further lower the teen out-of-wedlock birthrate, improve child-support levels, lower the size of the next poverty generation through pre-school and after school programs, and even reduce the size and cost of serious social problems such as crime” (215). In remarks before the House of Representative Committee on Ways and Means, Chairman Sigurd Nilsen agreed. “Economic theory,” he noted, “predicts that low wages or unemployment makes crime more attractive, even with the risks of arrest and incarceration, because of lower returns to an individual through legal activities” (15).

The data suggest, then, that Michael Harrington’s theory of the cycle of poverty holds true four decades after its introduction. Even research critical of some recipients of public assistance acknowledges that not all those who receive support are undeserving. David K. Shipler, for instance, reports “finding poor folks whose own behavior has not contributed something to their hardships: having babies out of wedlock, dropping out of school, doing drugs, showing up late to work or not at all” But, he adds, “it is also difficult to find behavior that has not somehow been inherited from the legacy of being badly parented, badly schooled, badly housed in neighborhoods where the horizon of possibility is so near at hand that it blinds people to their own potential for imagination” (15). Nilsen confirms Shipler’s conclusion when he notes that the “relationship between poverty and outcomes for individuals is complex, in part because most variables, like
health status, can be both a cause and a result of poverty” (8). Before the poverty problem can be solved, there needs to be agreement about its causes, effects and victims. As the discussion continues, and as poverty continues to be ambiguous, communication scholars must persist in analyzing how the terms of the debate are framed and argued.

It is clear that contemporary scholars and politicians are still engaged in defining what Schiappa refers to as “facts of essence” (6). As discussed in chapter one, facts of essence are concerned with discovering what something “is in reality” (6). As advances in technology and society are made, poverty becomes increasingly ambiguous. In *The Other America* Harrington discussed ways that the poor become invisible, they hide in separated areas, but also in ways like clothing. This true even more so today. With major discount retailers like Wal-Mart, Kohl’s, and Ross growing in popularity, it is easy for the members of the culture of poverty to disguise their economic state. Even items like pre-paid cell phones can help the poor become hidden among their middle and upper class counterparts. The definition of poverty, a seemingly simple fact of essence, has not yet reached a consensus among Americans. Both Johnson and Reagan presented different definitions for poverty and welfare reform, but decades later, the topic is still intensely debated. Therefore, the simple question of definition is still left unanswered—what is poverty?

**Conclusion**

Developing a clear understanding of the power of definition in presidential rhetoric is meritorious on its own terms. Understanding how acceptance of the terms of debate predisposes an outcome—or, at least, establishes favorable grounds for one
participant over others—increases even further the importance of studying the relationships between rhetorical definition and the construction of social realities.

Rodgers emphasizes that agreement on the terms of debate about poverty is essential to consensus about the causes of poverty; and the absence of such consensus impedes movement toward problem solving and policy making. He writes: “[E]ven being aware of the diversity and complexity of poverty and the use of welfare by the poor will not solve all analytical problems. Fashioning public policies to solve poverty would be easier if there was agreement about the causes of poverty” (58). It is not enough to acknowledge that poverty exists; that acknowledgement must go further to reach a unified reality of what causes people to enter into, and remain, in poverty. Here is where general opportunities lie for further study. How are contemporary presidential hopefuls defining this seemingly never-ending problem? Is it possible for discussants to come together to construct a reality of poverty that will allow for its total elimination? With the growing prosperity of America’s upper-class, are the poor becoming increasingly invisible? And at the more specific level, one topic that merits criticism is the rhetoric of John Edwards. His campaign is already being compared to Johnson’s War on Poverty. Is Edwards making the same mistakes? By vowing to eliminate poverty in the next 30 years, is he setting America up to fail?

An area of communication studies that has been thriving recently is analysis of the rhetoric of terrorism, specifically after the attacks on September 11. A simple subject search for this topic will yield abundant results. A similar search of analyses of poverty rhetoric, however, will result in a smaller body of work. Not discounting the scholarship on terrorism, the rhetorical discussion of poverty and welfare rhetoric must be expanded...
to explain fully the way politicians, both past and present, have depicted poverty’s victims and possible solutions. This will increase our knowledge of presidential rhetoric, the social construction of reality, and a segment of the population that only continues to grow.

Much research has already been done on the rhetorical presidency. Research on its origin, evolution, exemplary practitioners is substantial and growing. Other discussions could further explore the interrelationships between the power of definition and presidential rhetoric. As technology and society evolve, we are faced with more issues of definition. Stem cell research, same sex marriage, cloning, and genetic selection are only a few examples of opportunities presidents and other political advocates have—and will continue to have—to construct a reality based largely on definitions of key terms. In the process of defining terms, Shipler reminds us, political leaders may establish grounds from which solutions to urgent problems might emerge. “You cannot solve a problem without defining it,” he contends, “and if you don’t allow yourself a compete definition, you will never approach a thorough solution” (15). Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan both understood the importance of defining “poverty” and “welfare reform,” respectively; but neither succeeded in generating concrete policy that matched their rhetorical tactics. With 37-million Americans now counted among the poor, the search for leaders who might model the presidents’ accomplishments, while concurrently learning from their mistakes, could not be more urgent.
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