

# The Anti-Poverty Campaign

By Professor K. MCINTYRE

*This is the transcript of a talk given by Professor McIntyre of the Department of History, University of Natal.*

I have been asked to say something about the visit which my wife and I made last year to the United States. Clearly a general survey of impressions of the whole of the United States would be impossible within the time available, and a personal travelogue would be trite. So I have selected a matter which greatly interested us, and of which we were continually conscious, as we visited such places as Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Washington. Indeed it was in Washington, which we visited towards the end of our stay in the United States, that all our previous ideas and impressions concerning the war on poverty were crystallised. There, through the good offices of a friend of ours in the State Department, we learned something at close quarters of the Office of Economic Opportunity, something of its policies, objectives and methods of assault, which all determine the conduct of the war on poverty. We also met and talked with some who, within local Washington organisations, were directly engaged in the battles against ignorance, squalor, discrimination and poverty.

WASHINGTON IS A SINGULAR CITY, visually beautiful, with its impressive boulevards, the Potomac flowing gently under arching bridges into a serene tidal basin, 1,600 acres of Rock Creek Park winding its way into the very heart of the City. Yet there is another Washington, distinct from that of the White House, the Pentagon, the government buildings, the great embassies, swank shops and the beautiful suburbs where the well-to-do live. The centre of Washington is inhabited predominantly by Negro people. Here on the street corners can be seen middle-aged and old men who stand waiting, waiting, for nothing to arrive. They are hopeless and helpless, caught in the torpor of years, perhaps a life, of unemployment. Then there are those of the silent eyes, the Negro youth, although silent they see all; the beauty of Washington, its luxury and wealth, which however, does not seem to be for them, as they belong to the other Washington.

Although the Federal and D.C. governments have taken long strides in the elimination of racial prejudice, in hiring and promotion, and many Washington firms follow merit employment practices, actively recruiting trained Negro workers, the cold fact still remains that Negro unemployment and under employment, especially among Negro youth, is largely disproportionate when compared with that of the White population of Washington. So within the gates of the great City and under the very eyes of Congress, where money is voted and criticisms are voiced, there rages the war on poverty.

In terms of the programme originally launched by President Kennedy and prosecuted by Presi-

dent Johnson, it is estimated that there are some 34 million poor in the United States, and to date the Johnson administration has spent some 3 billion dollars on the campaign.

Feelings in the United States about the Anti-Poverty campaign are mixed. There is a great deal of apathy among the poor of the great cities and of the rural areas, as well as amongst those who have been called upon to finance the greatest assault that has ever been made on poverty. Some Americans doubt whether poverty can ever be totally eliminated from all parts of the United States. Some ardently support the campaign in the fervent belief that it is the only way in which the United States can be saved from a great internal catastrophe. Others again look with suspicion upon what, they believe, is a bureaucratic aberration which is sending millions of dollars down the drain. New converts continually arise, particularly amongst those of the poor who have benefitted from one of the many projects of the campaign. The critics increase, particularly amongst those who have heard stories of financial waste and mismanagement, or who have seen on television a Job Corps camp riot. However, all must agree that the campaign is a great, revolutionary social experiment, being a complete departure from the old traditional methods of social welfare under which the poor were simply handed out some form of assistance.

The philosophy of the campaign, originally propounded by John F. Kennedy, is to inspire the poor to save themselves from the disaster of poverty. Many middle class Americans still believe that the United States is the land of great

opportunity where a man can succeed if he wants to and that therefore the poor must be lazy won't-works.

Let's take the case of the pretty little blonde-haired girl of six who lived in a filthy Georgian shack. She had a vocabulary of 20 words. This little girl was not mentally retarded, she had just never been told a bed-time story or nursery-rhyme, she had never possessed a children's picture-book. And so she communicated by pointing, grunting or striking out in frustration. There are many other children like this little girl, and they will raise many more like themselves if the war on poverty fails. Children like this little girl enter school with a devastating handicap and never really make the grade. If they sit at the back of the class-room, keep quiet, and are nice to the teacher, they may be promoted at the end of each year, on what is sometimes called "social promotion", that is, going along with the same age group, and so many eventually leave school quite unable to read or even recite the alphabet. This accumulating ignorance constitutes a major part of the foundations of poverty, for in a technological society, the ignorant are virtually unemployable.

To help the children of the poor, the Anti-Poverty Campaign launched the Headstart Programme. Throughout the United States paid and unpaid volunteer teachers are giving private, individual tuition to these children, in order to raise them to the normal academic level of their age group. A friend of ours in Claremont, California, is working with a little Negro boy who came from the notorious Watt's district of Los Angeles. It is slow and painstaking work, for the confidence of the child has to be gained before there can be any intellectual advance. Even a little boy of eight is conscious of his ignorance, and, if his confidence is lost, he will not return because of embarrassment.

One of the principles behind the war on poverty is to encourage the people in great cities, and in the villages, to devise their own self-help programmes and to carry them through to success. In community-action programmes, the community is supposed to help itself. The idea is to get the poor personally involved and the law reads that there should be the maximum feasible participation by the poor. While this phrase is regarded, by the architects of the campaign, as being absolutely essential to the assault on poverty, it has also in fact slowed down the battle like a line of Sherman tanks. It has been responsible for all the political fighting in the big cities of the North and in the rural areas of the South, where maximum participation means participation by Negroes, and local political bosses of both political parties, are nervous of and hostile towards such a development. Several anti-poverty programmes in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago and Detroit, are producing evidence to show that many of the unemployed are quite incapable of

even completing a job application form, and, contrary to the "won't-work" accusation, they are also producing evidence to show that many who are without jobs do in fact want them. But, however incredible it may seem, they have not the slightest idea of where, or how, to look. They are indeed afraid of the State Employment agencies, for to the man who has been out of work for years, or to the youth who has never worked, they appear as alien authorities. Where small, neighbourhood employment agencies have been established, and staffed by people of the neighbourhood, the results have often been dramatic.

The answer to the problem of the uneducated, untrained youth was the formation of the Job Corps, designed to rescue youth from the worst possible conditions. The Job Corps has been the main target of attack by critics for there have been disasters. However, there are signs that the Job Corps may well become one of the brightest spots in the Anti-Poverty Campaign, for many youngsters who had given up on society, and whom society had given up, are now working. Some have returned to high school, and some, not many, but some, have gone on to College. Nearly 85% of the young people entering Job Corps camps are school drop-outs. They arrive in the camps as drifting, hopeless, jobless youngsters, who have decided that the Job Corps is their last opportunity to make good.

When the Job Corps was first launched, recruits arriving at its camps were so undernourished that it was decided to increase the daily diet from 4,100 calories (standard U.S. Air Force rations), to 6,000 calories. In all of the Job Corps camps previous neglect of teeth has pushed health costs far beyond what was originally estimated. The young people come from the slums of the great cities, from the Appalachian shacks, from the derelict houses on the fringes of towns, and from anywhere where the poor scratch a living in a land of plenty. Many come from broken homes, some have never known a father, some would prefer to forget a mother. They are tough, suspicious and bitter. They get drunk when they go out on pass, fight and are thrown into jail. This is the raw material which the Job Corps is getting in its camps all over the United States, and the Job Corps is expected to turn these rebellious, untrained youth into useful citizens.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of the Job Corps camps has been in the devising of new methods of teaching and in discovering why it is that school "drop-outs" give up, and what can be done about it. Reading is behind most of the problems, for few of the recruits entering Job Corps camps have a reading level of the sixth grade, while the majority are of the third grade level. Through the use of new techniques and equipment, such as the remedial reading laboratory, it has been possible to raise the reading level of these young people

from the third to the seventh grade within 5 months. Half the Job Corps man's time is spent in the *classroom*, where studies are directly related to vocational training. The young man who wants to be a machinist quickly discovers in the workshop that he cannot do it unless he can read detailed instructions. Vocational training programmes range from learning how to operate heavy road making equipment to the culinary arts. One of the interesting discoveries has been that business organisations are better at running Job Corps camps than are academic institutions or government agencies.

Camp Parks, one of the Job Corps camps in California, is run by the Educational Division of Litton Industries Inc. and is an outstanding example of how big business can run this kind of organisation. The Director of Camp Parks is Dr. S. S. Usian, who is a doctor of psychology with Litton Industries. He is not a dreamer, nor is his Company, which is a closely managed, industrial complex running 96 plants and laboratories in 21 States of the Union and 47 more in 12 foreign countries. Critics often complain that it costs 4,500 dollars to keep a young man in the Job Corps for 1 year, as much as it would cost to send a young man to Harvard University. Usian replies that the Job Corps man cannot go to Harvard, that he cannot go anywhere, and that unless he is salvaged he will end up on a welfare roll, and that it has been estimated that it costs over 30,000 dollars to keep a man, his wife and child on welfare for twelve years. Usian also maintains that the costs will come down, for the initial expenditure was made high, as it involved the rehabilitation of old army camps and facilities. Usian declared "these kids are restless

**T**HIS nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened . . .

It ought to be possible . . . for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or colour . . . every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated.

President Kennedy, June 11, 1963.

and they think in terms of right now. I think youngsters like this are the greatest threat to the Nation. They are the most prone to subversive elements for they are ready to follow anyone who offers them success, real or imagined, and they are against society, that is why it is so important for us to do something."



At this stage it is not possible to assess accurately the degree of success which has attended the Anti-Poverty Campaign, for the war is being conducted on so many fronts, and the projects are so varied and spread out, that it is impossible to measure accurately their progress. Many of the projects are only getting under way, and with 34 million poor, only the surface has been scratched. Officials of the Office of Economic Opportunity maintain that it is too early to make a meaningful assessment. Some of their informed critics agree that Congress has not been so charitable. Senator Dirksen of Illinois has launched blistering attacks on the campaign, and criticism from Congress is growing as they debate whether the United States can afford two wars, one in Vietnam and the other at home.

Opponents who would like to see an end to the campaign apparently do not see or take into account the many victories. The young prostitute from Harlem, the glue sniffing boy of Washington, the hopeless youth of the street corners in the slums of Chicago, the young narcotic drug peddler of San Francisco, who have all been rescued from their degradation, and there have been *thousands of other such victories*.

The Anti-Poverty Campaign is an imaginative attempt to destroy the scourge of poverty and all those who believe in its policies, objectives and methods of assault, hope and pray that the United States will continue this real war of liberation. To liberate some 34 million people and their descendants from the fetters and the humiliation of poverty. To us, even as strangers in their midst, it was an exhilarating and exciting experience demonstrating how many in the United States are determined to look further than tomorrow.