

States of the Union

ROBBING THE POOR

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



"It's no disgrace t' be poor, but it might as well be."

FROM *Abe Martin's Sayings and Sketches*, 1915

ON THE MORNING Richard Nixon buried Congress' national day-care program, which would have provided aid and comfort to the children of 8 million working mothers, I received in the mail a pamphlet from the American Jewish Congress (AJC) entitled,

"The Jewish Poor and the War Against Poverty." Most antipoverty funds, the AJC complains, are spent in officially designated "poverty areas" and are intended for young people. "But the Jewish poor are older persons, and few of them live in poverty areas. . . . This situation is inherently unjust. It must not continue."

But it will. Both the pamphlet and the President's veto point up the flabbiness of our social policies. For years we have been keeping the poor at arm's length with sermons and stingy programs. What they need is money and power.

It all began officially on January 8, 1964, when Lyndon Johnson declared war against poverty. "It will not be a short or easy struggle," he warned us, ". . . but we shall not rest until that war is won. We cannot afford to lose it." Yet there are more poor people in America today than there were eight years ago, although the proportion has dropped slightly. We continue to discover "new" victims like the elderly Jews of New York, whom we had thought were being cared for by their children in Scarsdale.

A critical assumption behind the Federal antipoverty program is that the poor live in "viable communities," and that all they require to break out of indigence is a sudden infusion of group enthusiasm. It is a simplistic version of the self-help concept, a throwback to the days when farmers helped each other build barns and harvest crops. As the AJC has observed, "If you live in such a community you are eligible to participate in the scores of programs funded under the [Economic Opportunity] Act." One trouble with this approach is that it ignores millions of poor people—particularly among the elderly—who have the ill luck to live among the moderately comfortable. To the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), that is guilt by association.

Even so, it may come as a surprise to many slum dwellers that they can participate in "scores of programs." Antipoverty funds have always been in short supply and have benefited few poor people. Hardly a week goes by, in fact, that some previously unheard-from group does not lay claim to the pitiful spoils of this phony war. The Italian-Ameri-

cans of Newark have petitioned the OEO for immediate assistance. So have the Armenians of Philadelphia, the Indians of Long Island, the Polynesians of our South Pacific empire, and the Scandinavians of Dogpatch, a miserable shantytown in rural Wisconsin.

Dogpatch is typical of the kind of "viable community" the war against poverty keeps bypassing. Only 40 miles west of Madison, it is home to 16 families, most of whom are unschooled and unemployed. Victims of the revolution in agriculture, they have been thrown off the land by machines, mergers and mortgage foreclosures. The shacks they inhabit are as bad as many in Georgia or Mississippi—cold, leaky and without plumbing.

Dogpatch has existed at least 30 years. In 1965, when the war against poverty invaded Wisconsin, everyone in the area agreed "something ought to be done." The county's Community Action Program took a survey and concluded that what the residents of Dogpatch needed most was decent housing. But a subsequent study revealed that no one in Dogpatch was eligible for Federally subsidized housing. They were too poor.

There are thousands of Dogpatchers and millions of "elderly Jews" in America—people who live in the wrong place at the wrong time for the wrong reasons, people who are not asking for much—only to be noticed and to be included when the OEO dispenses its thin gruel of national philanthropy. Head Start, Job Corps, on-the-job-training, community action—these are our handouts to the poor. While some programs are better than others, none will eliminate poverty. The sad thing is that even if the American Jewish Congress were to get everything it is demanding—mainly, a series of congressional amendments permitting the OEO to serve individuals directly rather than through "poverty areas"—poor Jews would remain poor. The fault lies not in our programs but in our general policies,

which stand Robin Hood on his head: They rob the poor and give to the rich.

Now we have a President who has sanctimoniously turned his back on the only impoverished Americans in whom he has ever professed a modicum of interest: the working poor and their children. A national day-care program would create "a new army of bureaucrats," he explained, thinking perhaps of the Pentagon. Besides, we should "enhance rather than diminish both parental authority and parental involvement with children. . . ." Thus in one stroke he has dashed the hopes of millions of poverty-stricken mothers. In places like Mississippi, where welfare is sporadic and miserly, many mothers must work or starve. What good is "parental involvement" when your child is hungry?

NIXON COULD inflict this wound without fear of political reprisal, though the nation's welfare mothers have presumably been organizing, lobbying and demonstrating ever since the war on poverty first identified them as a "force." Where were these mothers last month? Why didn't they bring their infants to Nixon and dump a week's worth of dirty diapers on the White House lawn? The impotence of the poor, after nearly a decade of Maximum Feasible Participation, tells us something about America and how it distributes power. When the chips are down, the blue chips win. Consider:

- One tenth of the nation owns nine tenths of the nation's wealth.
- About one fiftieth of the corporations account for two thirds of corporate assets and net income.
- One per cent of the population owns 70 per cent of the productive property.
- Because of corporate mergers, tax loopholes and official myopia, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen.

It is both bootless and heartless to pit welfare mothers against a sys-

tem with such immense concentration of wealth and power. The lives of the poor are marginal; crusades are for the affluent. A few years ago I interviewed a black man from Chicago who had completed a stint with the Job Corps and had been given employment in the suburbs. "I had to buy a car to get to work," he said. "Well, that first day, on my way to work, I got a flat tire. That made me two hours late. When I got there, the man said, 'You're fired.'"

We continue to study the poor man as if the solution to poverty lies within his grasp. It does not. It would be more accurate to say that the solution lies in the System. As Ferdinand Lundberg notes in his brilliant *The Rich and the Super-Rich*, "Down through history the dominant classes . . . or political elites have always been scrupulously prudent in avoiding taxes at the expense of the lower orders. The aristocracy of France before the French Revolution, for example, gave itself virtually total tax exemption . . . thus supplying not a little fuel for the onrushing tidal wave of blood."

If we are sincere about eliminating poverty, we will junk the Office of Economic Opportunity and replace it with an Office of Economic Justice. The agency would devote itself exclusively to stamping out unseemly prerogatives of wealth and power. The OEJ would have the authority to close tax loopholes, limit inheritances, break up trusts, and distribute excess revenues—through a minimum income program—to the poor from Dogpatch to Delaney Street. In addition, it would hammer away at state and municipal tax structures, wiping out the regressive sales tax and substituting a genuinely progressive income tax. (It might have to do something about school taxes, too, which penalize poor communities and favor those rich in real estate.) Finally, the OEJ would open a network of day-care centers for the children of working mothers, rich or poor or in-between.