Book Review

Freedom Is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and The Civil Rights Movement in Texas,
by William S. Clayson

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Reviewer: Nicolas Y. Riley

In many ways, the grand ambitions that characterized Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty during the 1960s mirrored those of the civil rights movement. Federal antipoverty officials took their cues from contemporary civil rights leaders and, often, sought to emulate their work. Moreover, many civil rights leaders themselves viewed their own efforts to combat racial inequality as inextricably linked to a broader struggle for increased economic opportunity. Yet, despite these common aspirations, LBJ’s War on Poverty ultimately left behind a very different – and much less celebrated – historical legacy than did the civil rights movement.

In his recent book, Freedom Is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and The Civil Rights Movement in Texas, William S. Clayson sheds new light on the historical relationship between these contemporaneous campaigns for social justice. He reexamines the much-maligned history of the War on Poverty by exploring its often-overlooked connections to black and Latino civil rights activists during the late 1960s. While Clayson’s account fails to seriously address this history’s impact on contemporary antipoverty

1. In 1963, John Lewis, then the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, criticized the Kennedy Administration for failing to tackle poverty with the same enthusiasm with which it sought to address civil rights. At the 1963 March on Washington, he asked, “What is in [President Kennedy’s civil rights bill] that will protect the homeless and starving people of this nation?” FRANCES FOX PIVEN & RICHARD A. CLOWARD, POOR PEOPLE’S MOVEMENTS: WHY THEY SUCCEED, HOW THEY FAIL 256 (1977).

2. In his final State of the Union address, President Reagan famously captured prevailing popular sentiment towards LBJ’s Great Society antipoverty programs: “My friends, some years ago, the Federal Government declared war on poverty, and poverty won.” President Ronald Reagan, Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union (Jan. 25, 1988), in 1 PUB. PAPERS 87 (Jan. 25, 1988).

programs, it nevertheless offers a keen and nuanced analysis of many previously unexplored ties between national civil rights struggles and local antipoverty campaigns in this period.

Clayson focuses, in particular, on the federal government’s Community Action Program – the most controversial piece of Johnson’s antipoverty agenda – and how it operated in Texas’s poorest communities. He describes how the Community Action Program, created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA), aimed to empower poor communities by helping them “organize politically” and facilitating their efforts to “confront unresponsive local establishments.” The program provided federal funding to “community action agencies,” which would operate local antipoverty programs. These community action agencies sought to include the members of the communities they served – for both staff and leadership support – so that each agency could target its community’s particular needs. Clayson’s work highlights the specific community organizations and grassroots activism that the program supported across Texas and, in so doing, offers new insight into the impact that the War on Poverty had on political mobilization at the local level.

*Freedom Is Not Enough* opens with a grim description of Texas’s racial and socioeconomic demographics in the 1950s and early 1960s, just before the passage of the EOA. While postwar Texas resembled the rest of the South in many ways – with widespread racial segregation and poverty rates that exceeded the national average – Clayson is careful to identify several of the state’s unique characteristics in order to justify his choice of scholarly focus. He notes, for instance, that the state’s large Mexican-American population distinguished Texas ethnically from many other states in this period and thereby complicated both racial politics and local competition for federal antipoverty resources. He also explains how Lyndon Johnson’s own Texas roots – specifically, his experience working in some of the state’s poorest communities – informed the design of EOA and, at the same time, inevitably colored many state politicians’ perceptions of

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7. CLAYSON, supra note 3, at 32.

8. Clayson describes one program that operated out of Harlem, NY, to illustrate the kinds of services a community action agency might provide. He notes that the program “provided information on existing welfare services, which were unfamiliar to many people in slum communities, along with public service jobs for young people, job information, some employment for neighborhood residents, and a forum for political organizing.” Id. at 33.

9. Id. at 13-19.

10. Id. at 14-15 (“Texas was also different from the rest of the South because it did not have a predominantly biracial society.”).

11. Id. at 91-94.
After setting the stage in this way, Clayson shifts his focus and briefly recounts the politicking that surrounded the EOA’s enactment before launching into a description of the legislation itself. Although Clayson covers all of the Act’s major components – including VISTA, Job Corps, Head Start, and other well-known programs – he quickly homes in on the centerpiece of the legislation: the Community Action Program (CAP). He notes that the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) devoted a significant portion of its resources to CAP and that, as a result, CAP quickly became the focus of criticism for many of Johnson’s political rivals.

While Clayson provides an engaging summary of the political jockeying that gave rise to CAP, his description of the program’s impact on Texas politics is ultimately much more interesting. He describes how the program – which provided only minimal control to state government officials – fueled anti-civil rights sentiment among white Texans, despite the Johnson Administration’s best efforts to dissociate its civil rights legislation from its antipoverty legislation. The book also explains how the government’s poor implementation of CAP frustrated other key constituencies. For instance, the OEO’s failure to achieve “maximum feasible participation” by the poor in community action agencies – along with its stated commitment to a “colorblind” antipoverty agenda – angered the increasingly militant racial justice activists in Texas’s black and Latino communities.

Clayson illustrates several other instances in which the OEO’s vague policy agenda left it vulnerable to attacks from both ends of the political spectrum. He notes, for example, that while some condemned the EOA as a capitalist tool designed to “quell the discontent seething in the nation’s ghettos,” others denounced it as a “socialistic scheme” designed to move the country toward “collectivization.” These various and conflicting critiques of the government’s poverty alleviation efforts reaffirm the conventional historical narrative under which a combination of poorly-defined goals, ineffective administrators, and unclear messaging effectively doomed the War on Poverty from the start.
But even as Clayson readily acknowledges these shortcomings, he also manages to subvert this traditional historical narrative by uncovering some of the substantive benefits that the OEO’s antipoverty work produced. Importantly, he does not try to cast these benefits in economic terms; rather, he describes them in political terms. Clayson explains how CAP-supported grassroots organizations helped invigorate and sustain the Chicano movement in Texas.24 These organizations, he writes, “gave young people valuable lessons in political organization and confrontation.”25 In addition, they provided young organizers and activists with critical “access to people.”26 Clayson documents how the OEO supported the formative political experiences of many major players in the movement for racial equality and Latino civil rights.27 Although these OEO-supported organizations were themselves subject to criticism from more militant groups – many of which, by the late ‘60s, had abandoned integration in favor of more radical goals – they nevertheless “provided thousands of civil rights and antipoverty activists with both financial resources and political experience.”28 Clayson notes that CAP created a “spirit of community action politics” that continued even after the program was disbanded. He specifically highlights groups such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a privately-supported network of grassroots organizations, which helped “fill[] the void left by the demise of the OEO.”29 Since many of these groups continue to support organizing in Texas today,30 Clayson suggests that they have become key participants in what he and other historians have dubbed the “long war on poverty.”31 In the final chapter of his book, Clayson asserts that this long-term perspective is precisely what is needed to overcome the roadblocks that hindered past efforts to achieve economic justice.32

While Clayson’s descriptive analysis is well-founded – private foundations have clearly taken up the fight for economic justice in many places where the federal government has abandoned its own antipoverty efforts – his prescriptive analysis seems incomplete. After all, the systematic dismantling of LBJ’s Great Society programs in the 1970s and

“was held accountable for the militant revolt among minority groups, blamed for causing urban violence or not doing enough to prevent it, and accused of racial bias from all sides.” In short, the agency “could not seem to please anybody.” Id. at 138.

24. Id. at 108.
25. Id. at 109.
26. Id.
27. Id. (describing the experience of Irma Mireles, who later became the head of the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, and her early political experience as an assistant at a CAP-sponsored community organization).
28. Id. at 149.
29. Id. at 150.
30. Id.
31. Id. at 157.
32. Id. at 155-56 (“A final lesson the history of independent grassroots organizing teaches is patience.”).
1980s deprived antipoverty advocates of more than just financial support – it deprived them of the government’s public endorsement of their cause. By suggesting that private foundations can somehow fill the void left by defunct War on Poverty programs, Clayson overlooks the legal and symbolic power that governmental action carries. Even if the EOA fell short of creating positive economic rights for individual citizens, it nevertheless represented the government’s firm commitment to expanding economic opportunity. Indeed, Johnson’s antipoverty program was, in many ways, the closest the federal government ever came to recognizing poverty as a substantive violation of individual rights – something that organizations like the IAF, regardless of how well they are funded, cannot ultimately achieve without governmental support. The demise of these War on Poverty initiatives, therefore, represented more than simply a lack of funding; it also represented the death of American antipoverty advocates’ last real opportunity to create substantive legal safeguards against poverty.

Despite this minor shortcoming in its conclusion, Freedom Is Not Enough still has plenty to offer, both to students of American political history and to current civil rights and antipoverty advocates. Clayson’s exploration of the local political impact of the OEO’s antipoverty agenda – and, specifically, its Community Action Program – provides an engaging and nuanced perspective of Johnson’s War on Poverty. In this way, Clayson’s narrative complements other recent scholarship documenting the OEO’s impact on local movements for racial and economic justice during this period.33 Additionally, Freedom Is Not Enough offers valuable lessons to contemporary antipoverty advocates seeking to replicate CAP’s inclusive model of community development today by describing the specific political roadblocks that the program initially encountered and thereby flagging potential pitfalls to avoid.34 Finally, Clayson’s work suggests that historians have more work to do in exploring the local benefits produced by the War on Poverty. Without further analyses like Clayson’s, traditional accounts of the relationship between racial and economic justice movements of the 1960s will remain incomplete.


34. See, e.g., Melish, supra note 4, at 110-33 (calling for a “21st Century War on the Sources of Poverty” based on many of the principles that informed the original design of CAP).