

PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH AND THE FRAMING OF POVERTY  
FROM THE WAR ON POVERTY TO  
THE WAR ON THE POOR

by

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Abstract

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Presidential narratives are influential components of the national conversation about social issues. In order to gain a better understanding of how the Presidents framed and discussed poverty and the poor State of the Union addresses between the years 1964 and 2014 were analyzed. The focus of this research was to identify the narratives the Presidents crafted about the war on poverty. Narrative analysis was utilized to unpack and these narratives and identify the different narrative forms they took while the Presidents presented and discussed the war on poverty. Initially the war on poverty was presented as a romantic quest to rescue the poor from the structural forces trapping them in poverty. Over the 51 State of the Union addresses, that narrative shifted to a tragic narrative that implicated the welfare system as the villainous force that harmed the middle-class and had to be defeated. This gave rise to a second romantic narrative that cast the middle-class as the victims of Government overspending on the unworthy poor. The narrative about the war on poverty ultimately ended during the Clinton administration after welfare was successfully framed as code for the unworthy poor and welfare reform was passed in 1996.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In 1964 Lyndon Johnson declared an unconditional war on poverty. In his State of the Union (SOU) Address the President outlined a broad set of tactics presented as a way to address the causes and symptoms of poverty, and set a solid foundation for defining poverty and the poor. In the fifty years that have passed since Johnson declared the War on Poverty the presentation and framing of poverty has changed. The impoverished have often been recast as fraudulent, lazy, and expensive (Reagan 1982), and explanations for the causes of poverty have shifted from structural to cultural (Nixon 1970). Programs designed to alleviate the suffering of the impoverished have been increasingly framed from necessary and effective to wasteful and expensive (Nixon 1970; Reagan 1982). Where President Johnson asserted that the impoverished lived "on the outskirts of hope" because we as a nation failed to "give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities", President Ronald Reagan argued that welfare programs were expensive and "rife with waste and fraud" (Johnson 1964; Reagan 1982). In more recent presidencies the poor were hardly discussed at all, as they were replaced as the vulnerable group by the middle-class.

Presidential speeches are powerful tools for promoting awareness and sharing meaning. Each of the Presidents following President Johnson have used speeches to frame and reframe the public discourse on poverty. Presidential speeches thus provide important clues as to how the War on Poverty declared by Johnson has been transformed into a war on the poor in subsequent administrations. The goal of this paper is to explore those shifts by analyzing the SOU addresses from 1964 to 2014.

### *Narrative Analysis*

Throughout this paper I will be using narrative analysis, a broadly constructed method of making sense of events relayed in story-like forms of communication (Young 2007), to examine and interpret SOU addresses. Communication is often used to relay information about past or current actions, and naturally lends itself to using story-like frameworks to illustrate such events. Events and ideas are folded into stories to make them more easily understood and internalized by the listener or audience. Jacobs and Sobieraj (2007) note that "by arranging characters and events into stories, people are able to develop an understanding of the past, an expectation about the future, and a general understanding of how they should act" (2007:5). Narrative analysis utilizes personal or public narratives as data, and involves the careful reading of these narratives in order to identify themes and patterns. Those themes and patterns can then be used as codes for analysis.

Northrop Frye outlines four main narrative forms: comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony (Frye 1957). During the course of the analysis the romance and tragedy forms emerged as particularly appropriate for this project. Both forms begin in similar fashion, with the birth or rebirth of the hero, the hero's youth, and a quest that must be completed. Frye explains the romantic quest as comprised of three stages: the perilous journey, the crucial struggle, and the exaltation of the hero (1957:187). In romance form the quest is successful and the hero brings about a better society. This leads to a stage in which the new and improved society is clearly visible and ends in a 'relaxed and contemplative haze' or generally happy ending (Frye 1957:202). In contrast, in the tragic form the quest is brought about by the violation of a moral law, and is unsuccessful due to personal failings of the hero. Young notes that tragedy is "fundamentally a story of human failing" as the tragic hero is incapable of overcoming the external forces that thwart their

progress in their quest (Young 2009:420). This leads to the hero's fall and ends in 'shock and horror' or an unhappy ending (Frye 1957:222). These narratives can also be progressive, regressive, or stagnant, depending on the progress made toward the goal of the quest. Gergen and Gergen note that tragic narratives "tell the story of rapid downfall of one who had achieved high position" whereas in romantic narratives "life events become increasingly problematic until denouement, whereupon happiness is rapidly restored" (Gergen and Gergen 1988:25-26). Tragic narratives are therefore regressive, as they show the situation of the protagonist getting worse or the quest failing. Romantic narratives are progressive, as they show the situation improving or the goals moving closer to completion. It is clear that both tragic and romantic narrative contain periods in which the quest is on a positive trajectory followed by periods in which the trajectory turns towards the regressive, as the forces of good and evil, at different times, hold sway. Those who employ the kind of strategic narratives found within SOUs work hard to capitalize on progressive narrative moments, by claiming victories, whereas regressive narrative moments are typically referenced in order to stress the need for additional resources and allies in the struggle.

Strategic narratives can also serve as rhetorical devices to advance the political speaker's agenda and definitions. This becomes particularly salient when presenting calls to action about social problems. Blumer asserted that social problems are "fundamentally products of a process of collective definition" (Blumer 1971:298). Strategic narratives can be used to promote specific definitions of phenomena such as poverty in order to frame them as problematic. Narratives can be particularly powerful rhetorical tools for the construction of social problems, as their story-like forms are conducive to presenting social problems in ways that seem intuitive and logical. In this sense, Presidents can become claims-makers through their narratives. Joel Best (1987) notes that claims-

makers hope to persuade others to accept their definitions of social problems, and that “they want to convince others that X is a problem, that Y offers a solution to that problem, or that a policy of Z should be adopted to bring that solution to bear” (Best 1987:102). While a detailed breakdown of the components used to construct poverty as a social problem beyond the identification of the narratives presented by the Presidents is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to recognize the construction and deconstruction of poverty as a social problem over the course of the SOUs to better understand the effect Presidential narratives ultimately had on how we define poverty.

Tracking the ongoing construction of these narrative forms create an effective framework for analyzing the SOUs, which were used to frame and justify each president’s approach to poverty. The quest to end poverty was generally framed as a romantic quest, whereas opposition to prior administrations’ work was often accomplished by reframing previous romantic efforts to mitigate poverty as tragic. Such reframing illustrated ideological differences with previous administrations on the appropriate course of action. While all the SOUs did not progress through all of the stages of the forms, they did tend to highlight progressive or regressive momentum which served to reinforce the validity of new policies.

In a general sense, speeches are scripted interactions between the speaker and the audience. It is during these speeches that Presidents are able to frame, or present their ideas in a way that promotes their interpretation over alternative interpretations (Feldman 2007), their views on social issues and tactics for addressing those issues. For the purpose of this paper I will be limiting my analysis to the speeches as a speech act, not the full interaction between presenter and audience. The main objective here is to look at the way information has been presented to the audience, and to explore the narratives presented about poverty. The narratives a president creates provide a logical

and easily understood way to examine these issues. Woven in to these speeches are the narratives, both obvious and subtle, that are intended to influence the way the audience understands the present, future, and moral implications of the topic being presented. Each narrative is purposeful and crafted to illustrate a point, and through careful examination those intentions can be revealed (Schank and Berman 2002). It is through narrative analysis that I hope to illuminate those meanings and better understand the way the Presidents hoped we would interpret the information they presented.

### *Presidential Speech*

Presidential speeches are at once presented as representative of what they believe is important to the American people, and widely perceived as what they believe on a personal level. The prestige of the Presidential office makes Presidential speech highly influential. Presidential speech helps to shape not just public opinion, but public policy as well. Jacobs and Sobieraj argue that the "narrative dimensions of political debate are a central element of the policy-making process" (2007:2). SOUs allow the Presidents to present these narratives to the American public and craft them in ways that are politically advantageous and to raise awareness of issues, rally support for their proposals, and use public support as leverage (Erisen and Villalobos 2014). The tactic of using public addresses to shape public awareness is not a guarantee of success even when done well. It is however a potent weapon in the presidential arsenal.

### *State of the Union Addresses*

The SOU fulfills the Constitutional requirement that the president "from time to time give to Congress information of the State of the Union" (US Constitution). While the Constitution does not require a specific date or timeframe for the SOU, it is traditionally given every year in January or February. The President acts as both the head of the government and the head of state, a combination that makes the SOU a "uniquely

powerful ritual" (Shogan 2015:4). The SOU is distinctive in that it provides the President the opportunity to present his entire legislative agenda in a single speech. Typical addresses to Congress and the American public are focused on specific events, issues, or legislative proposals. The State of the Union allows for more flexibility of topics provided they relate to the main purpose of the speech. Recurring themes that are common in the SOUs include comments on the past and prospects for the future, and calls for bipartisanship and optimism (Shogan 2015). The theme of past and future is often used in poverty narratives and are of special relevance to this project. In this theme the Presidents compare and contrast past events with ideas about the future, and use those events and ideas to establish the proper and moral course of action for policies and programs. Shogan notes that "through attention to both past and future, Presidents can use the State of the Union address to develop their own definition of the national identity" (Shogan 2015:7). Common in this theme is the President's presentation of his view of the American Dream, a powerful tool for affirming national identity, behavioral expectations, and moral definitions. Referencing the past to explain proposals is used to legitimize policy programs (Shogan 2015), which helps further arguments for needed policies, expanded services, and reform to current programs. Because the addresses contain these qualities and are delivered yearly they provide a consistent set of data to analyze the consistencies and shifts to presented definitions and policies.

### *Data*

For this project the SOUs and speeches that were presented as SOU substitutes between the years 1964 and 2014 will be analyzed. All of the SOU and substitute speeches delivered in this date range are available online through the American Presidency Project. The American Presidency Project is a website maintained by the University of California in Santa Barbara, and includes both oral and written SOU

addresses and their substitutes. This resource will provide the main data for the analysis. A majority of the speeches in the analysis are official SOUs, but five speeches are substitute speeches that were delivered at the beginning of the President's term. In 1981 President Ronald Reagan delivered the *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery*. Presidents George H.W. Bush, William J. Clinton, and George W. Bush delivered *Addresses Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Administration Goals* in 1989, 1993, and 2001 respectively. In 2009 President Barak H. Obama delivered an *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress*. These speeches were delivered and broadcast in February instead of January, but are otherwise consistent with the theme and style of SOU addresses. They are included to provide a consistent timeframe for the analysis. In each of the years where a substitute speech was used there was no official SOU address delivered by the President.

In 1973 President Richard M. Nixon delivered a series of written *State of the Union Messages to Congress*. There were six written SOU Messages delivered to Congress between February second and March fourteenth. While the first message was not delivered to a national audience, five SOU radio addresses were released and broadcast nationally. Each address had a specific topic and the radio address preceded their written equivalents delivered to Congress. The radio addresses were delivered between February fourteenth and March tenth. They were considerably shorter than the written versions, and were written in more accessible language. Because the public did not have immediate access to the written addresses the radio addresses will be used in the analysis. These were the only addresses that were not televised in this project, but they were broadcast live on nationwide radio.

For the purpose of this paper, each of the SOUs the Presidents delivered were read and analyzed in their entirety and coded for discussions about poverty, the poor,

tactics for addressing poverty, the role of Government, and vulnerable groups. Some of these codes, such as poverty and the poor, were decided upon prior to the project start. Others, such as the role of Government, came about after careful readings of the speeches. Analysis was centered on the sections highlighted by the codes, but the contexts of the entire speeches were taken into consideration to assess content and implication. Each speech delivered was analyzed as a separate data source initially, and then analyzed within the context of other speeches. The analysis focused on a chronological reading of the SOUs, to focus on the subtle shifts and progression of the definitions of the primary research topics.

Presidential speeches are influential, but there are limitations to their use as data. The messages from the President are sensitive to several factors that can influence their reach to the public and their legislative success. Presidential speeches, including the SOU, reach thousands of people through television and other media outlets. They do not reach everyone, however, and even those that watch may not remember or agree with the messages being sent. Welch noted that while the perception is that presidential speeches have a wide viewing audience, the viewership may be smaller and the retention of those who viewed the speeches may be less than once believed (Welch 2003). In his study based on President Reagan's speeches in the 1980's, he found that on average 45% of those polled had seen all or part of the speeches, and of those that watched only about 42% could remember one point made by the speech (Welch 2003). While this does not mean that the speeches do not hold power, Welch's study included SOUs as well as other speeches, the reach of the speeches may be smaller than expected. In his 2010 study, Welch found that while the viewership of public address was in decline, those who watched the addresses tended to be higher in political participation (Welch 2010). Even though there may be fewer people watching, those who watch are

more likely to be politically active and the influence of presidential speech may be more specifically directed, even if unintentionally, at those who are more likely to act. This is complicated by second-hand exposure to the speeches and messages, which may or may not be accurate presentations of the speeches, through the Internet, social media, and word of mouth. The speeches are well worth investigating, but it is important to note the limitations of their reach and influence.

## Chapter 2

### The Unconditional War on Poverty in America

President Lyndon Baines Johnson took office on November 22, 1963 just hours after President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated. In January of 1964, just seven weeks after being sworn in, Johnson delivered his first State of the Union address. While Kennedy had already started working on tactics to address poverty, it was with this address that Johnson declared to the nation an unconditional war on poverty. Poverty continued to be a focus for Johnson throughout his time as President, but by August of the same year the military action in Vietnam had escalated to a war after an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin. Thus, Johnson was faced with war overseas as well as increasing tensions at home. A strong proponent of the Civil Rights movement, Johnson championed the Civil Rights Bill. Its passage was a major milestone for the movement that also occurred during his first year in office. By 1965, he had helped push the Voting Rights Act through congress. Unfortunately 1965 was also a year of major civil unrest, and many riots broke out in major cities across the nation. Over the course of his presidency the Vietnam War would take a heavy toll on him personally as well as the War on Poverty, as resources were necessarily split between the two major fronts. Civil unrest created a public concern about crime, especially violent crime, and had a negative effect on public sympathy for the Civil Rights movement. By the end of his first full term as president Johnson had made the decision not to run for reelection. His final SOU is a farewell address that, while still advocating for continuing the war on poverty, was more personal and seemed less politically charged. Johnson knew that he was passing the torch to newly elected President Richard Milhous Nixon.

### *Launching the War*

President Johnson declared the war on poverty in his 1964 SOU, and set the country on a romantic quest to end poverty. At the onset he used language that reinforced the American Dream to help outline the justification for the war on poverty.

Declaring that the tactics were

Designed to help each and every American citizen fulfill his basic hopes-- his hopes for a fair chance to make good; his hopes for fair play from the law; his hopes for a full-time job on full-time pay; his hopes for a decent home for his family in a decent community; his hopes for a good school for his children with good teachers; and his hopes for security when faced with sickness or unemployment or old age. Johnson 1964

Johnson presented a picture of American prosperity that everyone deserved to enjoy.

The poor were presented as fellow Americans who were excluded from this dream, and worthy of the cost both economically and in human energy. The Federal Government was cast as the hero, able to end poverty and its causes. He warned that the onset of the quest, the perilous journey, would be difficult and that there were no simple solutions for the complex problem of poverty. Full of confidence but tempered with realistic expectations, he explained

It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest Nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it. Johnson 1964

This clearly communicated the end of poverty as attainable, but set the expectation of a prolonged fight. Wars are ongoing, each battle inching victory closer. The war on poverty was presented as no exception, and though the expectation was victory he set realistic expectations of the probable timetable. Johnson also presented the need for a concerted effort at all levels of government, as well as assistance from citizens.

Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the State and the local level and must be supported and directed by State and local efforts. 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. Johnson 1964

This casts citizens and members of State and local government as possible allies in the quest. Through its connection with the American Dream, the war on poverty was presented as a cause intertwined with the morals of the country. Each citizen could play their part in this moral cause through support and intervention.

Johnson's definition of poverty as structural provided the justification for intervention on behalf of those trapped in poverty. It cast the poor as innocent victims of a system that had failed to provide them with the resources needed to fully participate in the American Dream. Reinforcing his definition of poverty as structural and the poor as innocent victims, he explained

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. But whatever the cause, our joint Federal-local effort must pursue poverty, pursue it wherever it exists. Johnson 1964

Defining poverty as a system failure avoids blaming the victims of poverty, and helps to cast them as sympathetic characters. This is enhanced by the reification of poverty as an entity that must be pursued and vanquished. Poverty is presented as a force that harms the poor 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" (Johnson 1964). Poverty is cast as the villain against which the war on poverty is directed, and the poor are those innocent victims that require rescue.

Johnson presented the tactics for addressing poverty as a sound investment in America's future. Citing that money spent on social programs would have far greater returns than the initial investment, he focused on the positive effect the social programs

would have for the entire country. In regard to the investment at the individual level, he stated that "one thousand dollars invested in salvaging an unemployable youth today can return \$40,000 or more in his lifetime" (Johnson 1964). This helped associate specific outcomes with the proposed programs, as well as giving a concrete example of how the programs could affect individual people living in poverty. Using the example of an 'unemployable youth' also helps to associate the programs with one of the more sympathetic groups discussed in his definitions of who is poor. On a more macro-level, Johnson outlined how investment in the proposed programs would help all Americans as even those not in poverty would benefit. After he outlined the specific programs he proposed to create or expand, Johnson added:

These 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 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. 1964

Listing specific examples of the different proposed social programs goals, Johnson links the success of the programs to improvements in the everyday lives of all Americans. Building more schools, hospitals, and libraries would allow everyone in the community to have improved access to the services they provided. This speaks to the practicality of the proposed social programs, as they are presented as 'obvious' advantages for everyone, not just the poor. By illustrating the advantages to those not suffering from poverty as well as those who do, Johnson presents the tactics as financially advantageous to those who would ultimately be funding the war on poverty: the taxpayers. This reinforces the roles of the poor as the victims of the system, and the taxpayers as the group helping the hero on its quest to eliminate poverty.

Integral to the presentation of tactics to address poverty was defining the government's role in poverty relief. While outlining the tactics he was proposing, Johnson stated:

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. Johnson 1964

Each of the categories Johnson mentions are related to programs he hoped to expand or create. These were all programs that the government would be responsible for creating and maintaining either financially or directly. This illustrates Johnson's view that the government's role in poverty relief was direct action and support. Also imbedded in this statement was reinforcing the sympathetic nature of those the programs were designed to help directly. Helping 'more Americans' and highlighting 'young Americans' helps to create a sense of connectedness with the audience and those in need. Stating that programs were designed to help those fellow Americans 'escape from squalor and misery' reinforces the imagery of people physically separated from the resources needed to participate in the American dream. This in turn reinforces the structural explanations Johnson had attributed to poverty and the need for intervention by the government. Also it is worth noting that there is the implication that other citizens are already carrying these people through the then current forms of relief. These programs would also be funded by the government, and therefore through the taxes of other citizens, but they would serve to liberate the poor. Other citizens are carrying them when they could be assisting them, and assistance makes more financial sense if the goal is to help them escape from poverty.

The perilous journey phase continued throughout Johnson's administration, and each of his SOUs reinforced both the need for the war on poverty and the progress being

made against poverty. In his 1965 SOU Johnson continued to present the war on poverty as a worthy moral endeavor, and again presented the poor as innocent victims.

Most Americans enjoy a good life. But far too many are still trapped in poverty and idleness and fear. Let a just nation throw open to them the city of promise... to the poor and the unfortunate, through doubling the war against poverty this year. Johnson 1965

While his first SOU was prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, for the remainder of his administration he had to present the war on poverty as a high enough priority to justify continuing efforts while faced with an increasing defense budget and an escalating war in Vietnam. He consistently presented the war on poverty as a moral quest and the poor as worthy of assistance even when resources were necessarily split between domestic and military goals. In 1966 Johnson presented the two wars as morally intertwined and explained

We will not permit those who fire upon us in Vietnam to win a victory over the desires and the intentions of all the American people. This Nation is mighty enough, its society is healthy enough, its people are strong enough, to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society here at home. Johnson 1966

American exceptionalism empowered the nation to fight both fronts and be confident in victory. The war in Vietnam is cast as another force against the war on poverty, and connecting the enemy in Vietnam with the enemy of poverty creates an even stronger moral stance for fighting and winning the war on poverty. This is further reinforced when Johnson discussed sacrificing support for the war on poverty because of the war in Vietnam.

Time may require further sacrifices. And if it does, then we will make them. But we will not heed those who wring it from the hopes of the unfortunate here in a land of plenty. I believe that we can continue the Great Society while we fight in Vietnam. But if there are some who do not believe this, then, in the name of justice, let them call for the contribution of those who live in the fullness of our blessing, rather than try to strip it from the hands of those that are most in need. And let no one think that the unfortunate and the oppressed of this land sit stifled and alone in

their hope tonight. Hundreds of their servants and their protectors sit before me tonight here in this great Chamber. Johnson 1966

After connecting the two wars as morally intertwined Johnson crafted a scene where funding and support for both were available and those calling for cuts in social programs for poverty as unjust. It also cast at least some of the members of Congress as the champions of the poor and oppressed, which implies they are on the side of justice and morally sound in their convictions to defend the war on poverty.

Over the course of his administration Johnson presented a predominantly progressive narrative for the war on poverty. He regularly discussed the successes of social programs created to address poverty, and used those successes to reinforce the importance of poverty relief programs as well as the progress being made in the fight. In his final SOU Johnson discussed the successes and failures of the programs, but called for continued effort.

This is the richest nation in the world. The antipoverty program has had many achievements. It also has some failures. But we must not cripple it after only 3 years of trying to solve the human problems that have been with us and have been building up among us for generations. I believe the Congress this year will want to improve the administration of the poverty programs by reorganizing portions of it and transferring them to other agencies. I believe, though, it will want to continue, until we have broken the back of poverty, the efforts we are now making throughout this land. Johnson 1969.

Johnson acknowledged there were setbacks to the programs, but presented them as minimal in comparison to the 'many' achievements. While the statement begins with a somber tone, it builds to a more enthusiastic call to break the back of poverty. Never fully admitting regression, Johnson continued to present an overall progressive narrative and highlighted successes over setbacks. The programs are imperfect but effective, and he continues to call both Congress and the people to arms against poverty.

Over the course of his administration Johnson crafted a romantic narrative about the war on poverty. Discussion and mention of America as the wealthiest nation on earth

created the basis for a golden age era which precludes the quest phase of the narrative. The reification of poverty as a force oppressing the poor gave the country an enemy to focus their efforts upon, and created the for-and-against dichotomy which cast supporters as just and moral. Those who were against the war on poverty were cast as working against justice, and were subtly accused of lacking faith in American exceptionalism. The war on poverty remained primarily in the perilous journey stage of the quest, and Johnson called for a continuation of efforts in his final SOU. The war had many advancements which were presented as small victories, but there was no final battle that fully defeated poverty. This ties back to Johnson's presentation of the war on poverty as requiring a long term commitment, but did not negate the confidence he communicated when discussing the programs.

Because his initial presentation of poverty relief programs and the war on poverty included a realistic timetable, he was able to reinforce the efficacy of the programs even though success was not instant. The single largest setback for the war on poverty during his administration was the military escalation in Vietnam. This created a competing romantic quest for the country to embark upon, and while Johnson presented the outcomes of both as intertwined resources were split between the two fronts. By the end of his administration Johnson had launched the war, but it was left to future Presidents to continue the efforts. Ending on a progressive note, where he acknowledged setbacks but highlighted successes, Johnson effectively presented a forward moving romantic narrative about the war on poverty.

#### *From Romance to Tragedy- Nixon and Ford*

When Nixon took office in 1969 he inherited the ongoing war in Vietnam, as well as continued civil unrest. The 'Long Hot Summer' of 1967, which saw riots in 150 cities, was followed by the summer of 1968 where 125 cities experienced riots in response to

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Nixon declared that he wanted 'peace with honor' in response to the Vietnam War, and declared a 'war on crime' in response to the riots and the corresponding rise in violent crime in America. While this certainly had an influence on the start and early part of his presidency, later events such as visits to China and Russia, and his work towards scaling back the Cold War were also significant during his time in Washington. The SALT agreements in 1972 were incredibly important for scaling back the arms race between the US and communist countries. By 1973 the Vietnam War had ended for the US, but the same year the story about the burglaries in the Watergate Hotel escalated. In 1974 President Nixon resigned after the impeachment process has progressed to a point where it was obvious he would face criminal charges.

Almost immediately after taking office President Nixon reframed the war on poverty from romantic to tragic. The Government, previously cast as a hero able to rally the support needed to win the war on poverty, was presented as unable to meet all the promises it had proclaimed.

Ours has become-- as it continues to be, and should remain-- a society of large expectations. Government helped to generate these expectations. It undertook to meet them. Yet, increasingly, it proved unable to do so. Nixon 1970

The romantic hero presented by Johnson was recast as tragic, failing to live up to its promises because of a lack of self-knowledge about both itself and its abilities. This was further reinforced by Nixon's call to reform the welfare system. Stating that it "penalizes work, breaks up homes, robs recipients of dignity" and should be abolished in favor of a program that focuses on work incentives (Nixon 1970). This marks a distinct departure from Johnson's assertion that a lack of jobs was a symptom of poverty and not a cause. Nixon hinted at those not working as causing their own misfortune, and presented work incentives as effective tactics for addressing poverty. Further reinforcing the tragic presentation of the previous administration, Nixon went on to state

We have heard a great deal of overblown rhetoric during the sixties in which the word "war" has perhaps too often been used-- the war on poverty, the war on misery, the war on disease, the war on hunger.  
Nixon 1970

This undermined the very premise of the fight against poverty as a war, and worked to redirect resources and focus on issues and programs prioritized by the Nixon administration. This effectively recast social programs created to assist the poor under Johnson's administration as harmful and hyperbolic. Calling the war on poverty overblown rhetoric creates the impression that the social problem of poverty was never as important as it was presented.

In further redefining the narrative from romantic to tragic, Nixon presented the welfare system as the villainous force instead of poverty itself. The social programs that were designed to empower the poor and raise them out of poverty were cast as harmful.

We cannot delay longer in accomplishing a total reform of our welfare system. When a system penalizes work, breaks up homes, robs recipients of dignity, there is no alternative to abolishing that system and adopting in its place the program of income support, job training, and work incentives which I recommended to the Congress this year. Nixon  
1970

This established the new goal of abolishing the then current welfare system, as well as casting the system itself as the villain of the narrative. Nixon described the welfare system as monstrous, and placed it in direct opposition to the poor and taxpayers (Nixon 1971). The implication is that the previous tactics designed to address poverty are now victimizing the poor. The only solution presented is to vanquish the system and replace it with a more just program.

In contrast to Johnson's casting of the poor as universally sympathetic and worthy of assistance, Nixon introduces an element of doubt to the innocence and worthiness of the poor. Some of the poor, those able to work but unwilling, are presented as secondary villains or at least on the side of the monstrous welfare system.

Let us provide the means by which more can help themselves. This is the goal. Let us generously help those who are not able to help themselves. But let us stop helping those who are able to help themselves but refuse to do so. Nixon 1971

While the assertion does not cast the poor as monstrous, it does imply at least some of the poor have fraudulent intents when receiving welfare benefits. Even those who are in need of assistance are implied to have more responsibility for their poverty and the way in which they are to escape poverty. There are three distinct groups of poor presented in this statement: the poor that require assistance so they can help themselves out of poverty, the poor that cannot help themselves and require assistance through no fault of their own, and those who capable of working but instead choose to collect benefits. It is with this distinction that Nixon established a hierarchy of poverty, which incorporated the implication that some of those who are poor are less worthy of assistance than others. This is especially pertinent for Nixon as he was trying to build a new republican majority. By the time Nixon was elected, his political strategy had become a "woven tapestry of racial fears, economic conservatism, support for increased law and order, opposition to expanding federal welfare for the poor, and support for extending federal assistance to white, urban, blue-collar Democrats" (Spitzer 2012:459). This strategy was meant to appeal to white working-class and blue-collar workers in the north who were increasingly resentful of welfare, especially welfare directed at poor African-Americans (Spitzer 2012). The hierarchy of poverty places those who are poor through no fault of their own at the top of the hierarchy as worthy recipients, including the working poor as well as the elderly and disabled, and those who are poor because of their choices are deemed unworthy of assistance and welfare reform is presented as a way to kick them off the welfare rolls.

While Nixon introduced these concepts, Ford reinforced and expanded upon them through his SOUs. He presented the Government as the same tragic hero, failing due to a lack of self-knowledge and overstepping its ability.

But in the recent past, we sometimes forgot the sound principles that guided us through most of our history. We wanted to accomplish great things and solve age-old problems. And we became overconfident in our abilities. We tried to be a policeman abroad and the indulgent parent here at home. We thought we could transform the country through massive national programs, but often the programs did not work. Too often they only made things worse. Ford 1976

Explaining that the Government 'forgot' its guiding principles is illustrative of the hubris involved in launching the war on poverty. He then links this 'indulgent' behavior to programs that either exacerbated the issues or simply did not work. This reinforces the tragic narrative crafted by Nixon, and that government may have had good intentions but its solutions were failing. This is further emphasized when Ford addressed welfare programs.

But everyone realizes that when it comes to welfare, government at all levels is not doing the job well. Too many of our welfare programs are inequitable and invite abuse. Too many of our welfare programs have problems from beginning to end. Worse, we are wasting badly needed resources without reaching many of the truly needy. Ford 1976

This statement served a dual purpose: to illustrate the Government was doing a poor job of addressing poverty and to stress the possibility of abuse in the welfare system. This bolsters Nixon's presentation of those able but unwilling to work receiving benefits, and again presents the welfare system as the villain. The programs were not only prone to abuse, but the abuse kept resources from reaching those who deserved assistance. Ford also highlighted fraud in the food stamp program.

Last year I twice sought long overdue reform of the scandal-ridden food stamp program. This year I say again: Let's give food stamps to those most in need. Let's not give any to those who don't need them. Ford 1976

This reinforced the concept of those receiving benefits that were able but unwilling to work, or those who did not truly deserve assistance. This was in comparison to those he presented as most in need, who were being victimized because resources were being split between them and those who could provide for themselves.

Ford presented welfare and other social programs as expensive to the American taxpayer. During his administration the country faced high unemployment as well as high inflation. Social programs were presented as another manifestation of the Government's tragic quest when he described the effects the programs were having on the Federal budget.

Part of our trouble is that we have been self-indulgent. For decades, we have been voting ever-increasing levels of Government benefits, and now the bill has come due. We have been adding so many new programs that the size and the growth of the Federal budget has taken on a life of its own. Ford 1975.

Like Nixon before him, he presented the programs as money poorly spent and explained the cost for the programs would continue to increase annually. Because they would increase every year, there was no way to anticipate how much they would affect the budget. He explained that the programs cost more each year because "the number of people eligible for most of the benefits increase[s] every year" (Ford 1975). Having an ever increasing drain on the budget, especially when the programs were presented as vulnerable to abuse and supporting those who were not worthy of assistance, is presented as further evidence of the tragic nature of the war on poverty. By connecting the social programs with the ever increasing Federal budget, Ford also presented them as in direct conflict with the needs of the middle-class taxpayers. He needed to address both high levels of unemployment and high inflation. This was a difficult problem because typically tactics that address unemployment do so at the expense of raising inflation and vice-versa. His proposed solution to this issue was tax cuts for individuals and

businesses. This tactic was designed to create a balanced budget in the future and stimulate job creation. In order to cut taxes and achieve both goals he stated the government would need to limit the growth of current programs and avoid creating any new ones. One of the groups of programs he proposed needed to be restrained were those tied to the Consumer Price Index (Ford 1975). That group included social security and food stamps, and the proposal was a one year maximum increase of five percent (Ford 1975). President Ford stated:

None of these recommended ceiling limitation, over which Congress has final authority, are easy to propose, because in most cases they involve anticipated payments to many, many deserving people. Nonetheless, it must be done. I must emphasize that I am not asking to eliminate, to reduce, to freeze these payments. I am merely recommending that we slow down the rate at which these payments increase and these programs grow. (1975)

It is clear that he feels that even though the payments are going to many deserving people, there is no choice but to restrict the increase of the benefits. Discussions of fraud and expense helped to make the proposal more attractive as the restrictions would also affect those who were receiving benefits that were presented as undeserving. According to historical data the Cost of Living increase for Social Security, which is based on the Consumer Price Index, in 1975 was eight percent (SSA.gov 2015). While this shows that the proposed restraints were not successful, it also shows that because of inflation the increased need based on the Consumer Price Index was eight percent. Proposing to limit increases for benefits for programs like Social Security and Food Stamps that are below the rise in the cost of living would have placed those using the programs in a position of having significantly less purchasing power than previous years. Because of the high inflation rates that were acknowledged at the beginning of this SOU, it is unlikely that Ford would have been unaware of the increases in prices. While explaining the purpose of reducing the federal deficit Ford stated:

It is a question of simple arithmetic. Unless we check the excessive growth of Federal expenditures or impose on ourselves matching increases in taxes, we will continue to run huge inflationary deficits in the Federal budget. (1975)

This implies that the deficits have already caused inflation, and if the deficit is not addressed it will continue to cause inflation to rise. Later in the same SOU Ford states that "people have been pushed into higher tax brackets by inflation, with consequent reduction in their actual spending power" which also shows awareness of the effect of inflation on purchasing power. Proposing tax cuts for individuals while restricting the increases on programs such as Social Security and Food Stamps illustrates the shift in priority from the poor to the middle-class. The benefits of one are placed higher than the potential hardships to another. It also illustrates how costly the war on poverty was to the country, and reinforces the tragic nature of the quest to end poverty.

#### *A Slight Reprieve- Carter*

President James Carter was faced with a plethora of both foreign and domestic challenges during his presidency. The energy crisis dominated domestic issues. OPEC's price hikes lead to high levels of both unemployment and inflation. Carter helped to champion alternative fuel sources in Congress including wind, solar, and synthetic fuels (Davis 2003:509). In 1978 the shah of Iran, who had been assisted in his takeover of Iran by the C.I.A, was overthrown by the Ayatollah Khomeini. This shift drastically changed Iran's trade policies with the United States, as the Ayatollah referred to America as the 'Great Satan' and cut off oil exports (Reeves 2000:226). In 1979 Three Mile Island, a nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania, suffered a partial melt-down of the reactor core, which had a major effect on the future of nuclear energy in America (Davis 2003). OPEC raised the cost of oil again the same year, further exacerbating the energy crisis.

The issues in the Middle East and Soviet Union demanded a majority of the President's attention during his administration. After the Ayatollah gained power in Iran,

President Carter allowed the ousted shah to receive medical treatment in America. In response approximately 500 supporters of the Ayatollah stormed the American Embassy in Teheran taking more than 50 Americans hostage. The hostage situation would prove one of President Carter's most challenging issues during his presidency. He approved a rescue mission that failed to retrieve the hostages and ended with a helicopter crash that killed 8 service men. The corpses were displayed and mutilated on television by pro-Ayatollah Iranians. It wasn't until President Ronald Reagan's inauguration day that Iran freed the hostages.

President Carter offered a gentler rebuke of the war on poverty, as he discussed the poor in far more sympathetic terms than the previous two administrations. When addressing poverty Carter reinforced the Government's limitations, stating that only a 'true partnership between government and the people' could help to address such large issues. He explicitly states that the Government cannot eliminate poverty, and went on to explain that "those of us who govern can sometimes inspire, and we can identify needs and marshal resources, but we simply cannot be the managers of everything and everybody" (Carter 1978). While the language is less chastising than previous administrations, the statement still reaffirms the concept that the government is incapable of leading the quest to vanquish poverty. Reinforcing the partnership between the people and the government is similar to Johnson's presentation of poverty as a national problem requiring a concerted effort between Federal, State and local levels, as well as with individuals. The difference here is that Carter displaces more responsibility to the people and far less to the government. It is also a slight shift from Nixon and Ford in that he is not stating that the government is doing a 'bad job' of dealing with poverty, but that the government isn't capable of dealing with those issues on its own (Ford 1976). It requires

the combined effort, like Johnson presented, but implies onus rests on the people more than the government.

Carter did address the need to assist those who were disadvantaged, but maintained the concept of the hierarchy of poverty through discussions of work programs. As with previous administrations, unemployment was presented as a cause for poverty instead of a symptom as described by Johnson, and Carter presented poverty relief as tied to job creation that would incorporate the poor in to the workforce. He still advocated welfare reform, and stated "when welfare reform is completed, we will have more than a million additional jobs so that those on welfare who are able to work can work" (Carter 1978). Carter did avoid the able-but-unwilling definition of some of the poor, but clearly presented jobs as a way to address poverty for those capable of working but receiving benefits.

We know that in our free society, private business is still the best source of new jobs. Therefore, I will propose a new program to encourage businesses to hire young and disadvantaged Americans. These young people only need skills and a chance in order to take their place in our economic system. Carter 1978

The primary difference was that Carter acknowledged there was a skills gap between those working and those in poverty and not working. He called for the private sector to assist with relief by hiring the disadvantaged.

Carter was far less active in defining the war on poverty as a tragic narrative, but that in itself is telling. The tragic narrative had become so accepted that he didn't attempt to reframe it, but instead discussed the poor and poverty within the established frame. He discussed some of the programs that Johnson had enacted in positive terms, but also advocated welfare reform and implied that some benefits were sufficient if unused by the poor.

We must never accept a permanent group of unemployed Americans, with no hope and no stake in building our society. For those left out of

the economy because of discrimination, lack of skills, or poverty, we must maintain high levels of training, and we must continue to provide jobs. Carter 1979

It is notable that President Carter includes discrimination along with lack of skills and poverty as possible reasons for long-term unemployment. Carter states that the high levels of training must be maintained, which implies that the training was available if people wished to take advantage of the programs. While he uses sympathetic language to present the poor and unemployed, he also reinforces the availability of training and jobs which hints at the possibility that there are some who are suffering because they have chosen not to participate. Maintenance and provision are not the same as expansion and outreach.

#### *Summary*

President Johnson presented the war on poverty as a romantic quest to eliminate poverty and rescue the poor. He presented the poor as a universally sympathetic group that was worthy of rescue, and the Government as the hero capable of victory over poverty. The Government did require assistance from the State and local governments as well as from citizens, and those who were helping were presented as heroic for their intervention. Over the course of his administration international and domestic events, such as the war in Vietnam and the civil unrest following the civil rights movement, necessarily split resources and focus with the war on poverty. The many programs enacted to address poverty under Johnson had their successes and setbacks, but overall the programs were presented as making progress in the war on poverty.

Beginning with President Nixon the narrative about the war on poverty shifted from romantic to tragic. The Government was presented as failing to address poverty due to its lack of self-knowledge and hubris, and the programs for addressing poverty were presented as wasteful and expensive. The poor were recast from victims to suspicious

characters, some receiving benefits they did not deserve and others able to work but preferring to receive aid from the Government. Welfare replaced poverty as the villain in the narrative, and the poor abusing the system were presented as villainous by association. While Carter offered a more sympathetic interpretation of poverty and the poor, by the time he took office the tragic narrative had fully replaced the heroic and his presentation worked within the tragic narrative instead of actively reinterpreting it back to romantic. This illustrates the successful reframing of poverty and the poor by Nixon and Ford, and helps to illustrate how those reinterpretations influenced the national conversation about poverty and the poor.

## Chapter 3

### The Rise of the Middle-class

By the time President Reagan took office in 1981 the country had been dealing with increasing inflation and unemployment for nearly a decade. The oil crisis in the 1970s worsened the fragile economy, causing the price of oil to skyrocket and shortages to occur. Political situations such as Nixon's impeachment trial and subsequent resignation, as well as the hostage crisis in the middle-east during Carter's administration had weakened faith in the Government. Reagan was a former Hollywood actor, governor of California, and a highly charismatic speaker. Using his considerable oratory skills, he crafted concurrent narratives about the war on poverty and the plight of the middle-class. He advanced the tragic narrative of the war on poverty, and utilized Nixon and Ford's groundwork to craft a romantic narrative about the plight of the middle-class.

#### *Tragedy, Villainy, and Criminalization- Reagan*

Beginning with his first SOU Reagan reinforced the tragic narrative about the war on poverty. The Government was presented as using its power of taxation for purposes beyond their intended scope. This equated using taxes to fund the social programs connected with the war on poverty as a non-legitimate purpose.

The taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes. It must not be used to regulate the economy or bring about social change. We've tried that, and surely we must be able to see it doesn't work. Reagan 1981

By using taxes for purposes beyond their legitimate purposes, the Government is presented as not only overstepping its authority, but also doing so in order to bring about social change. The changes financed through tax dollars are explicitly described as failing, and failing in a way that is obvious to all. This reinforces the tragic nature of the war on poverty, and the Government as a tragic hero. Also imbedded in Reagan's narrative was a consistent connection of social programs with 'waste and fraud' (Reagan

1981). Where previous administrations cast the welfare system as the villain, Reagan placed more responsibility on the poor themselves. By repeatedly connecting the recipients of the social programs benefits with fraud, he recast the poor as the villains of the narrative. They were presented as the 'greedy' who received benefits meant for the truly needy, and took advantage of the system.

Committee after committee of this Congress has heard witness after witness describe many of these programs as poorly administered and rife with waste and fraud. Virtually every American who shops in a local supermarket is aware of the daily abuses that take place in the food stamp program, which has grown by 16,000 percent in the last 15 years. Reagan 1982

This presented every person using food stamps as suspicious because the abuse is presented as so rampant that nearly every American had witnessed it occurring. In addition to the implication of massive amounts of abuse he also described significant growth in the program over the previous 15 years. This reinforces the importance and cost of fraud, and further implicated those receiving benefits as an ever growing number of people taking advantage of the system. While there were mentions of the truly needy, more often the focus was directed at the able-but-unwilling, or those who were actively taking advantage of the system. Reagan specifically addressed a cultural explanation of poverty.

In the welfare culture, the breakdown of the family, the most basic support system, has reached crisis proportions- female and child poverty, child abandonment, horrible crimes, and deteriorating schools. After hundreds of billions of dollars in poverty programs, the plight of the poor grows more painful. Reagan 1986

Cultural explanations of poverty shift the blame for poverty from structural forces to individual explanations. By discussing the 'welfare culture' Reagan shifted the cause of poverty from a failure of the system to give each person a fair chance to the failure of the poor to prosper. Cultural definitions of poverty appeal to the American value of rugged individualism, which is strongly rooted in the ideas of personal responsibility for ones

situation in life and the existence of equal opportunity (Kerbo 2012:255). Poverty occurs when the poor are unwilling to work hard, and therefore they deserve to live in poverty. Previous administrations touched on the cultural explanation of poverty through their discussion of those who were able but unwilling to work, but it was Reagan who expanded it and utilized it in conjunction with waste and fraud to fully recast the poor to the villains in his vulnerable middle-class narrative. This is particularly relevant for Reagan as he had utilized the theme of waste and fraud and the imagery of the 'welfare queen' to exemplify "everything he believed was wrong with government programs" during his campaigns (Gustafson 2009:655). Linking waste and fraud with the people who received welfare benefits continued throughout his presidency. The stigma associated with receiving welfare was amplified by associating welfare with fraud, and reinforced through the imagery of the 'welfare queen'. Gustafson (2009) noted that "these 'welfare queens' were treated not merely as stereotypes of poor black mothers on aid, but as archetypes- perfect examples of what welfare recipients become over the course of years on the dole" (Gustafson 2009:657). This further reinforced the middle-class as victims of the social programs enacted to assist the poor as the poor receiving benefits were criminalized through this imagery and the theme of waste and fraud.

While the truly deserving poor were still cast as victims, the middle-class became the focus of Reagan's tragic narrative.

Waste and fraud are serious problems. Back in 1980 Federal investigators testified before one of your committees that "corruption has permeated virtually every area of the Medicare and Medicaid health care industry." One official said many of the people who are cheating the system were "very confident that nothing was going to happen to them." Well, something is going to happen. Not only the taxpayers are defrauded; the people with real dependency on these programs are deprived of what they need, because available resources are going not to the needy, but to the greedy. Reagan 1982

The taxpayers were cast as the primary victim of waste and fraud, and the deserving poor were presented as secondary victims. Those committing the fraud were portrayed as unrepentant, which further vilified those receiving benefits. Reagan countered their confidence in their immunity from consequences with the vague threat that 'something is going to happen' which denotes a second concurrent narrative about the middle-class. The war on poverty had transformed in such a way as to cast the middle-class taxpayers as the victims of the skyrocketing cost of social programs. Those who received benefits were cast as suspicious characters. The poor were stuck in a system that was "spreading dependency" and "bondage", or they were presented as guilty by association with the welfare programs through their abuse or sheer cost (Reagan 1985).

Like previous administrations Reagan connected the spending on social programs to the Federal Deficit. Growth of the Deficit was directly connected to the growth of social programs such as food stamps, and stated the "deficits come from the uncontrolled growth of the budget for domestic spending" (Reagan 1983). Calling the growth of the deficit a "clear and present danger to the basic health" of the country reinforced the severity of the problem caused by the social programs and the people who received benefits (Reagan 1983). The issue of the deficit was related directly to taxpayers, and the injustice of overburdening them while social programs' costs grew exponentially.

Whether government borrows or increases taxes, it will be taking the same amount of money from the private sector, and, either way, that's too much. Simple fairness dictates that government must not raise taxes on families struggling to pay their bills. The root of the problem is that government's share is more than we can afford if we're to have a sound economy. Reagan 1984

The Government is again cast as a tragic character, as it was taking on more than it could effectively navigate and creating large deficits in the process. This also reinforced

the victim status of the middle-class, especially middle-class families, as they were stuck paying for the incompetency of the Government.

Over the course of his administration Reagan presented the war on poverty as over and ultimately unsuccessful. Instead of poverty as the primary social problem he discussed the welfare programs as a social problem, and he expanded the cultural definition of poverty to further cast the poor as the villains in the tragic war on poverty narrative.

My friends, some years ago, the Federal Government declared war on poverty, and poverty won. Today the Federal government has 59 major welfare programs and spends more than \$100 billion a year on them. What has all this money done? Well, too often it has only made poverty harder to escape. Federal welfare programs have created a massive social problem. With the best of intentions, government created a poverty trap that wreaks havoc on the very support system the poor need most to lift themselves out of poverty: the family. Dependency has become the one enduring heirloom, passed from one generation to the next, of too many fragmented families. Reagan 1988

While the language seems sympathetic toward the poor, asserting that poverty was made harder to escape, stating that welfare dependence is passed from generation to generation and describing the families that relied on welfare as fragmented reinforces the cultural stereotypes of poverty. It implies that parents, in this case often single mothers, pass on little more than how to abuse the system. Whether intentional or not, the implication is that the failure and flaws lie in the poor and the system is flawed as a result of a naïve trust in those who wish to abuse it by not leaving the system and passing on dependence from generation to generation.

#### *From Vulnerable to Victims- Bush*

George Herbert Walker Bush took office in 1989, after serving as Reagan's Vice President for two terms. While the economy was strong and there had been many positive accomplishments in foreign affairs, there were some serious domestic issues when Bush took office. The country faced huge budget deficits, national debt, and crime

and incarceration rates were climbing, statistics that correlated strongly with the increased efforts in the war on drugs (Reeves 2000). Bush prioritized increased efforts on the war on drugs and educational reform, and largely reinforced Reagan's narrative about the war on poverty and the needs of the middle-class. Reinforcing the tragic nature of the war on poverty, as well as the cultural definitions of poverty presented by Reagan and previous administrations, Bush called for reforming the failed welfare system. Like Reagan Bush framed his discussion of welfare and poverty as an 'ask anyone' situation.

Ask American parents what they dislike about how things are going in our country, and chances are good that pretty soon they'll get to welfare. Welfare was never meant to be a lifestyle. It was never meant to be a habit. It was never supposed to be passed from generation to generation like a legacy. It's time to replace the assumptions of the welfare state and help reform the welfare system. Bush 1992

Welfare was framed as an issue that was on every American's mind. The poor were no longer described as being trapped in poverty, but living the welfare lifestyle. Not unlike Reagan's description of the poor passing down an enduring legacy of dependence, Bush describes the poor as living the welfare lifestyle and passing it down as a family tradition, which places the definition for the reason of their poverty as cultural. The only structural force mentioned was the welfare state, which was presented as an enabler reinforcing the failure of the system as the outcome of the tragic quest to end poverty.

Further reinforcing the cultural definition of poverty was his statement about the poor's responsibilities if they receive welfare. After discussing the welfare lifestyle, he continued:

States throughout the country are beginning to operate with new assumptions that when able-bodied people receive Government assistance, they have responsibilities to the taxpayer: A responsibility to seek work, education, or job training; a responsibility to get their lives in order; a responsibility to hold their families together and refrain from having children out of wedlock; and a responsibility to obey the law. We are going to help this movement. Often, State reform requires waiving certain Federal regulations. I will act to make that process easier and quicker for every State that asks our help. Bush 1992

There are several important aspects to this statement for defining poverty and the poor. First is the responsibility for addressing the issue was placed at the feet of the poor. He discussed the responsibility of the poor to the taxpayers, and not the responsibility of the government in conjunction with the taxpayers for helping the poor. Reinforcing President Reagan's vilification of the poor, President Bush stated that the poor have a responsibility to 'get their lives in order' and 'obey the law', implying that they currently do neither. He also brought the morality of the poor in to question by stating they have a responsibility to maintain two-parent households and refrain from having children out of wedlock. Finally stating that the poor had a responsibility to seek work, education, or training implies that they were doing none of these things. Each time he reminded the poor of their responsibility he was making a statement about what it was assumed they were not doing, which was acting like responsible, moral, law abiding citizens. He did preface the statement with able-bodied as a qualifier, but that only reinforces the previously defined ideas that the poor are able to work but unwilling. Those that are the truly deserving poor are only those who cannot work for a valid reason such as age or disability. All other recipients of welfare are implied to be able-bodied people who are choosing to be irresponsible and receive welfare instead of working. This effectively recasts the poor receiving benefits as villains, and reinforces the victimization of the middle-class taxpayers.

Building on previous administrations, Bush presented the middle-class as vulnerable and discussed different tactics that would address their needs. While some of the tactics were presented as helping both the middle-class and the poor, the reforms disproportionately benefitted the middle-class. By focusing on the needs of the middle-class, Bush effectively continued the recasting of the middle-class as the victims in a romantic narrative placing the priority on their needs. Bush proposed a housing initiative

that was presented as a way for more people to have greater access to the American Dream of home ownership. He also proposed reforming taxes and other personal finance issues. In 1991 he discussed financial changes geared toward helping the middle-class, and stated "My budget again includes tax-free family savings accounts; penalty -free withdrawals from IRAs for first-time home buyers; and to increase jobs and growth, a reduced tax for long-term capital gains" (Bush 1991). In 1992 he again asked for cuts to capital gains taxes, and proposed an extension of benefits for unemployment.

I'll tell you, those of you who say, "oh, no, someone who's comfortable may benefit from that," you kind of remind me of the old definition of the Puritan who couldn't sleep at night, worrying that somehow, someone somewhere was out having a good time. The opponents of this measure and those who have authored various so-called soak-the-rich bills that are floating around this Chamber should be reminded of something: When they aim at the big guy, they usually hit the little guy. And maybe it's time that stopped. Bush 1992

Bush acknowledged that opponents of the bill were concerned that the 'comfortable' stood to benefit from these reforms. He chose to negate that criticism by chastising their concerns and claimed that helping those who are more financially stable protects 'the little guy'. Each of the tactics discussed to increase jobs and growth were geared toward helping the middle-class. With the exception of tax free family savings accounts, the benefits are for financial actions that are out of reach for most in poverty. Even tax free family savings accounts rely upon having enough funds every pay period to be able to save, which is not an option for most living in poverty. The family savings plan, tax cuts, and unemployment benefit extensions were all directed at helping those fully involved in the mainstream economy, and the benefits they created were exclusive to those who earned enough money to save or benefit from increased tax breaks. Bush was a strong proponent of cutting the tax on capital gains to encourage 'risk takers' and 'small businesses', and attempted to illustrate how those who would benefit most made far less than the public believed (Bush 1990). He claimed the largest group that would benefit

from a cut in the capital gains tax were those with incomes less than \$50,000 per year (Bush 1992). According to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), examples of capital assets, from which you stand to have capital gains or losses, include items like homes, household furnishings, and stocks or bonds (IRS 2015). Most people living in poverty do not own such assets, and do not stand to gain from capital gain tax cuts. The middle-class clearly stood to benefit the most from these tax cuts. Included in his middle-class centric reforms and initiatives were ending the 'banking credit crunch'(Bush 1992) and adamantly opposing new taxes. When discussing the banking credit situation President Bush described those as suffering because of the crunch as 'the untold number of hard-working, responsible American workers and business men and women who've been forced to go without needed bank loans" (Bush 1992). These proposals clearly identified the middle-class as a group that both deserved and required assistance. Through building on Reagan's foundation of middle-class needs, and casting the poor as the villains victimizing the middle-class, Bush effectively flips the narrative to a romantic quest to rescue the middle-class.

### *Summary*

Over the course of Reagan's administration those receiving welfare were further vilified, and the stigma of receiving aid was compounded through the criminalization of poverty through connecting it with fraud in the welfare system. This helped to craft a new narrative about the victimized middle-class. Though the tragic narrative of the war on poverty continued, the concurrent middle-class narrative gained dimension. Bush largely reinforced Reagan's narrative on poverty, and expanded on Reagan's middle-class narrative. Through the introduction of middle-class centric reforms, while simultaneously advocating for welfare reform and reinforcing Reagan's presentation of those on welfare, Bush solidified the narrative of the vulnerable middle-class. This switch from the poor as

the victims of the narrative to the middle-class effectively ended direct discussion on the war on poverty. Reagan was the last President to mention it directly in a SOU. While there was still discussion of the truly needy, the worthy poor were cast as secondary victims and the middle-class were prioritized.

## Chapter 4

### Reform and a New Romance

William J. Clinton took office 1992 amid a temporary slump in the economy. The deficit was rising, and the national debt had hit \$4 trillion dollars (Reeve 2000). In the first two years of his presidency, both the House and the Senate had Democrat majorities. While this could have given Clinton a political advantage, scandals surrounding both Clinton and his wife shook public confidence. In the election of 1994 Republicans took control of the House and the Senate for the first time since 1954 (Reeve 2000), and used that majority to pass several major conservative legislative items including a complete overhaul of the nation's welfare system, which was signed in to law by Clinton in 1996. Reeves (2000) noted that the reforms were "the first major reversal of liberal welfare state policy in sixty years" (Reeves 2000:272). The 1996 welfare reform marked a turning point in the narrative about the poor and those who received government assistance. Clinton often used sympathetic language to describe the poor, but advocated a strict welfare to work program that included time limits for government assistance.

I know from personal conversations with many people that no one, no one wants to change the welfare system as badly as those who are trapped in it. I want to offer the people on welfare the education, the training, the child care, the health care they need to get back on their feet, but say after 2 years they must get back to work, too, in private business if possible, in public service if necessary. We have to end welfare as a way of life and make it a path to independence and dignity.  
Clinton 1993

Clinton replaced 'waste and fraud' with welfare to work, and consistently discussed welfare in terms of a pathway to independence from the system. Previous administrations had emphasized the need to reduce the number of people receiving aid, but Clinton focused less on those who were abusing the system and highlighted those in the system who wanted to become part of the mainstream economy. This cast the poor in a more sympathetic light, but did not revitalize the romantic narrative set forth by Johnson.

Instead welfare reform was presented as a way to bolster the middle-class. The goal of reform was to elevate the poor to the middle-class through work requirements, and reduce the deficit by reducing the cost of social programs. Where Reagan and Bush worked toward vilifying the poor, Clinton returned to placing the blame for welfare dependence on the system itself. In sharp contrast to that framing, however, the reforms were distinctly punitive in nature. Gustafson (2009) noted:

As a result of the reforms, the federal government and the state instituted policies and practices that burdened welfare receipt with criminality; policed the everyday lives of poor families; and wove the criminal justice system into the welfare system, often entangling poor families in the process Gustafson 2009:665

Reagan rhetorically connected criminality with poverty through his portrayal of those on welfare, but the welfare reforms of 1996 empowered the states to codify the connection.

Reforms also targeted absent parents and had strict and punitive child support collection components. The reforms were largely successful in removing people from the welfare rolls, but they did not necessarily improve the financial situations of those in poverty. Boushey and Wenger (2006) found that women who left welfare in the late 1990s, after welfare reform, were actually slightly less likely to qualify for unemployment insurance than those who left welfare prior to reforms. While the differences were not statistically significant, they still ran counter to expectation because the job market was strong, there had been an increase to the minimum wage, and welfare reform included work requirements and limits to the amount of time people could receive benefits (Boushey and Wenger 2006).

This ultimately brought the tragic narrative about the war on poverty to a close. Once welfare reform had occurred in 1996, references to the poor, especially in relation to the benefits they received, were largely relegated to reinforcing the success of the

welfare reforms or references to reforms that were geared toward the middle-class but could also benefit poor and low-income workers.

A strong nation rests on the rock of responsibility. A society rooted in responsibility must first promote the value of work, not welfare. We can be proud that after decades of finger-pointing and failure, together we ended the old welfare system. And we're now replacing welfare checks with paychecks. Last year, after a record 4-year decline in welfare rolls, I challenged our Nation to move 2 million more Americans off welfare by the year 2000. I'm pleased to report we have also met that goal, 2 full years ahead of schedule. Clinton 1998

The reforms were presented as successfully ending decades of failure in regard to welfare and the poor. While it is far from the romantic narrative put forth by Johnson, it is described as a successful ending to the tragic narrative on the war on poverty. The system that had been vilified by Clinton and previous administrations had been replaced by a new system that was moving people off of welfare in record numbers. Probably the most telling sign that the narrative had ended was that once this reform had been enacted, focus was redirected to the middle-class and away from the poor. Previous administrations had an ongoing dialog about welfare reform and the poor, but the reforms effectively made such discussions obsolete. The only exception to this was the continued dialog about the defense of Social Security and Medicare, as healthcare and protecting Social Security were high priorities of Clinton's.

#### *The Middle-class Romantic Narrative*

Clinton brought the middle-class narrative to a full romantic swing. He presented reforms and policies that were designed to assist the middle-class as the primary, and sometimes only, group targeted for relief.

For 30 years, family life in America has been breaking down. For 20 years, the wages of working people have been stagnant or declining. For the 12 years of trickle-down economics, we built a false prosperity on a hollow base as our national debt quadrupled. From 1989 to 1992, we experienced the slowest growth in a half a century. For too many families, even when both parents were working, the American dream has been slipping away. Clinton 1994

Clinton criticized Reagan and Bush era trickle-down economics as ineffective, and presented any gains as 'false prosperity'. Laying the groundwork for his presentation of a romantic quest to bolster the middle-class, he described a bleak retrospective view of wages and economic growth. This creates the foundation for his romantic quest to rescue the middle-class from dwindling economic security and stagnant wages. The Government was cast as the hero once again, working toward improving the circumstances of the middle-class. The poor, no longer cast as the villains, were largely omitted from the conversation about the middle-class. There were occasional mentions of how some who were low-income would also benefit from the reforms, but the primary focus was the middle-class.

As early as 1994 Clinton presented a progressive narrative about the quest, applauding Congress for working with his office to reduce the deficit, reform taxes, pass the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the Brady Bill (Clinton 1994). The progressive nature of the narrative continued throughout his administration as he presented the middle-class as a hard working sympathetic group, and the need for continued effort to rescue them from their fragile economic position. In his 1995 SOU, Clinton proposed a middle class bill of rights as part of his New Covenant between the American people and the Government and explained:

I have proposed the middle class bill of rights, which should properly be called the bill of rights and responsibilities because its provisions only benefit those who are working to educate and raise their children and to educate themselves. It will, therefore, give needed tax relief and raise incomes in both the short run and the long run in a way that benefits all of us. Clinton 1995

This was a four part plan that included tax deductions for education and training after high school, a tax cut for families with children under the age of 13, a "GI Bill for America's Workers," and individual tax accounts that would allow people to withdraw funds tax free in certain instances (Clinton 1995). The tax accounts would allow people to

make tax free withdraws for health care, first time home buying, educational costs, or to care for a parent (Clinton 1995). Clinton presented the 'GI Bill for American workers' by explaining:

We propose to collapse nearly 70 Federal programs and not give the money to the States but give the money directly to the American people, offer vouchers to them so that they, if they're laid off or if they're working for a very low wage, can get a voucher worth \$2,600 a year for up to 2 years to go to their local community colleges or whatever else they want to get the skills they need to improve their lives. Let's empower people in this way, move it from the Government directly to the workers of America. Clinton 1995

Clinton emphasized American workers as a vulnerable group, and portrayed them as part of a hard working American middle-class that required assistance. Tax-centric tactics increase incomes by exempting taxes or reducing the tax burdens of income groups, but they do not drastically change the gross income of families or individuals. They allow people to keep more of what they have earned. These tactics, along with appeals to reform the healthcare system, improve education, and raise the minimum wage, were connected with Clinton's welfare to work theme and designed to strengthen and bolster the middle-class. Those in the middle-class were presented as suffering while doing everything right: working hard, trying to save for the future, and dedicating time and resources to their children.

The fate of the middle-class was also connected to the welfare of the entire nation, as Clinton presented the success of the middle-class as national success. Tactics were presented as successful, but Clinton warned of complacency in the face of success. The project of building and protecting the middle-class was presented as ongoing. In 1999 Clinton reported that America had created the longest peacetime economic expansion in American history including rising wages, job creation, high levels of homeownership, large reductions in the welfare rolls, and low levels of unemployment

(Clinton 1999). He followed this report on the progress made by calling for continued action.

Now, America is working again. The promise of our future is limitless. But we cannot realize that promise if we allow the hum of our prosperity to lull us into complacency. How we fare as a nation far into the 21st century depends upon what we do as a nation today. So with our budget surplus growing, our economy expanding, our confidence rising, now is the moment for this generation to meet our historic responsibilities to the 21st century. Clinton 1999

This connects the success of the middle-class with the success of the nation, and calls for continued action to ensure that success will continue in the years to come. It also reinforces the progressive trend of the narrative.

#### *Terror and Recovery- G.W. Bush*

On the morning of September 11, 2001 America was forever changed. America had been the victim of a terrorist attack, and we were struck with shock and grief, terror and confusion. Two planes had been hijacked and intentionally crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. By the end of the day two more planes were hijacked, one crashing into the Pentagon and the other in Pennsylvania after passengers fought back against the hijackers. In the news was a constant stream of people attempting to escape ground zero, walking through ash and rubble. The American public watched in horror as the towers collapsed with workers and emergency personnel still trapped inside, and as people jumped from the upper level windows to escape the fire and collapse.

This traumatic event for the American people defined George W. Bush's presidency. Within the first year of his administration he was thrust into the role of a wartime President, but the enemy America faced wasn't confined to a single location or group. He declared the war on terror, and over the course of a few years America would engage in military actions against Afghanistan in response to the attacks, and in Iraq in

response to reports they had weapons of mass destruction. The economy went from recession, to recovery, only to fall into recession again after the housing market, artificially inflated by speculative and predatory lending practices, crashed. A devastating hurricane ravaged the Gulf Coast. The levees in New Orleans failed, causing widespread destruction. A state of emergency was declared, and the Coast Guard and FEMA worked on addressing the issue. The delay in Federal response drew sharp criticism, some of which fell on the President. Disaster relief was a slow process, and thousands of people lost their lives or were declared missing. G.W. Bush presided over the U.S. during a tumultuous time in its history, and each event impacted his administrations goals and priorities.

G.W. Bush's first SOU occurred prior to the events of 9/11, and its priorities and tone differed greatly from those delivered after the attack. It was also prior to the first recession, the smaller of the two only lasting eight months (NBER 2003), so his presentation of the economy and proposed budget are unique as compared to subsequent SOUs. He continued the romantic middle-class narrative by advocating for tax reforms. When G.W. Bush took office the Government budget was balanced and had a built in surplus of funds. The surplus was presented as evidence that the government had been taking too much from hardworking Americans, and he proposed reducing tax burdens on the middle-class so they could keep more of their income. This presented the Government as overstepping its bounds, but he didn't go so far as to recast it as a tragic hero. He presented the tax reforms as a way that the Government could make amends for previous mistakes.

G.W. Bush's SOUs after the attacks of 9/11 refocused priorities toward national security, addressing the recessions, and winning the military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Welfare is mentioned twice in his SOUs, once to request reauthorizing previous

welfare reform, and again to announce that welfare cases had dropped by "more than half over the past decade" (G.W. Bush 2006). In his 2008 SOU, President G.W. Bush proposed an expansion of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Designed to give poor and low-income children access to private and charter schools, he presented a grant program for young children. Discussing NCLB success, he called for Congress to strengthen it by adding "Pell Grants for Kids" (G.W. Bush 2008). He asked for \$300 million to fund the grant program, and likened it to the Pell Grants program for low-income college students. His justification was that poor and low-income children did not have access to quality private and charter schools, and they were trapped in failing public schools. He presented it as a way to 'liberate' these children from schools that were not up to the task of providing a quality education. This illustrates that discussion of the poor and poverty were not entirely absent from his SOUs, but the attention directed at the poor was significantly less than previous administrations. There was no overarching narrative connecting these proposals like there was prior to the welfare reforms in 1996. Like discussions about the middle-class prior to Reagan, discussions of the poor were secondary to the primary economic and social goals of the administration.

Most of G.W. Bush's proposals were centered around economic recovery and benefits for the middle-class. The romantic narrative about the middle-class was moving through one of the particularly difficult parts of its perilous journey, as recession and terrorism had caused significant setbacks in the quest to strengthen the middle-class. While the cost of recovery and the military actions in Afghanistan had altered the economic landscape of the country, G.W. Bush still advocated for the middle-class. Even after the events of 9/11 President G.W. Bush continued to champion tax cuts and reform. In his 2002 SOU he addressed the first recession, and he included taxes as a tactic for economic recovery.

Last year, some in this Hall thought my tax relief plan was too small; some thought it was too big. But when the checks arrived in the mail, most Americans thought tax relief was just about right. Congress listened to the people and responded by reducing tax rates, doubling the child credit, and ending the death tax. For the sake of long-term growth and to help Americans plan for the future, let's make these tax cuts permanent.

After discussing the cost of the military action in Afghanistan, and the increased budget for defense and homeland security, he still presented tax cuts as vital to the economic recovery of the middle-class and the country. This is another example of how the fate of the middle-class has been presented as the economic fate of the country. When the country was threatened with economic recession and the increasing costs of defense and homeland security, tactics to strengthen the middle-class are presented as having a positive, progressive effect on the nation. G.W. Bush continued to reinforce the need for these tax cuts throughout his administration. In his 2006 SOU he declared that the tax relief "left \$880 billion in the hands of American workers" and strongly requested that the tax cuts be made permanent (G.W. Bush 2006). These tax cuts were consistently connected to keeping more money in the hands of the American worker, and often tied to helping small business. There were mentions of how tax cuts would help those with the smallest incomes, but the primary importance was placed on the middle-class.

#### *Recession and Recovery- Obama*

President Barack Obama took office a year into the Great Recession of 2008. This had a significant influence on his administration as he prioritized economic recovery, especially in his first years in office. The recession had devastating effects on employment and the housing market, and relief for the middle-class was prioritized as they were thrust into economic situations previously only experienced by the poor.

I know that for many Americans watching right now, the state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others, and rightly so. If you haven't been personally affected by this recession, you probably know someone who has: a friend, a neighbor, a member of your family. You don't need to hear another list of statistics to know that our economy is in

crisis because you live it every day. It's the worry you wake up with and the source of sleepless nights. It's the job you thought you'd retire from but now have lost, the business you built your dreams upon that's now hanging by a thread, the college acceptance letter your child had to put back in the envelope. The impact of this recession is real, and it is everywhere. Obama 2009

While this statement is presented as addressing everyone, the situations used as examples are ones that are middle-class centric. Very few people living in poverty, or near poverty, had jobs with retirement plans or owned a business. Obama presented the recession as a middle-class issue, even while acknowledging it was 'everywhere'. This strengthened the romantic narrative about the middle-class as it provided concrete examples of the need of the middle-class. Obama also reinforced the casting of the Government as the hero while addressing the tactics for economic recovery.

I reject the view that says our problems will simply take care of themselves, that says Government has no role in laying the foundation for our common prosperity. For history tells a different story. History reminds us that every moment of economic upheaval and transformation, this Nation has responded with bold action and big ideas. In the midst of Civil War, we laid railroad tracks from one coast to another that spurred commerce and industry. From the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution came a system of public high schools that prepared our citizens for a new age. In the wake of war and depression, the GI bill sent a generation to college and created the largest middle class in history. And a twilight struggle for freedom led to a nation of highways, an American on the Moon, and an explosion of technology that still shapes our world. In each case, Government didn't supplant private enterprise; it catalyzed private enterprise. It created the conditions for thousands of entrepreneurs and new businesses to adapt and to thrive. Obama 2009

Referring to previous advances and successes, Obama presented the Government as a hero that empowers the nation to recover and innovate. The Government is presented as the hero in partnership with the private sector, and as having the power to effect positive change on the economic landscape.

Obama presented a cautiously optimistic progressive narrative about the recovery. While he highlighted the progress made, he was often quick to acknowledge

that recovery was not happening fast enough for many still suffering the effects of the recession.

One year ago, I took office amid two wars, an economy rocked by a severe recession, a financial system on the verge of collapse, and a Government deeply in debt. Experts from across the political spectrum warned that if we did not act, we might face a second depression. So we acted, immediately and aggressively. And one year later, the worst of the storm has passed. But the devastation remains. One in 10 Americans still cannot find work. Many businesses have shuttered. Home values have declined. Small towns and rural communities have been hit especially hard. And for those who'd already known poverty, life's become that much harder. Obama 2010

This illustrated that progress had been made, but the lasting effects of the recession had not passed. While it is primarily focused on the issues facing the middle-class, Obama does note that those living in poverty prior to the recession are also suffering its effects. The main focus, however, was the plight of the middle-class. Unemployment, loss of small businesses, and falling property values were pushing many of those who were solidly middle-class prior to the recession dangerously close to poverty. This reinforces the vulnerability of the middle-class, and maintains their status as the victims in the romantic narrative. Progress was being made, however slow it may have seemed, and the primary focus was on the issues facing the middle-class.

Over the course of his administration Obama identified two major villains in his narrative about the middle-class, Wall Street executives and big banks that perpetuated predatory lending. Identified as directly contributing to the financial crisis, they were cast throughout his administration as the primary villains in the middle-class narrative.

In 2008, the house of cards collapsed. We learned that mortgages had been sold to people who couldn't afford or understand them. Banks had made huge bets and bonuses with other people's money. Regulators had looked the other way or didn't have the authority to stop the bad behavior. It was wrong, it was irresponsible, and it plunged our economy into a crisis that put millions out of work, saddled us with more debt, and left innocent, hard-working Americans holding the bag. In the 6 months before I took office, we lost nearly 4 million jobs. And we lost another 4 million before our policies were in full effect. Obama 2012

Even as the economy began to recover, Wall Street executives and the big banks were still identified as the primary villains. There were also mentions of irresponsible actions by previous administrations, but they were cast more as creating the conditions for Wall Street and big banks to create the recession. They carried some of the blame, but were not vilified so much as they were presented as misguided or inept.

By his 2014 SOU Obama presented a largely progressive and hopeful report on the union. While recovery was ongoing, the middle-class was faring far better than it was in 2009, and progress was expected to continue. Of note in this final SOU in the analysis is a subtle shift in the narrative on the middle-class. Where previous conversations about the challenges to the middle-class were presented as connected to the recession and big banks, here Obama discussed income inequality and the expansion of the upper-class elite.

Today, after four years of economic growth, corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, and those at the top have never done better. But average wages have barely budged. Inequality has deepened. Upward mobility has stalled. The cold, hard fact is that even in the midst of recovery, too many Americans are working more than ever just to get by, let alone to get ahead. So our job is to reverse these trends. It won't happen right away, and we won't agree on everything. But what I offer tonight is a set of concrete, practical proposals to speed up growth, strengthen the middle class, and build new ladders of opportunity into the middle class. Obama 2014

This statement recognizes the successes of economic recovery efforts, but also highlights income inequality as a possible unforeseen side effect of those efforts. This presented a new challenge to the security of the middle-class. As the recession was close to defeat income inequality was on the rise, threatening the expansion and maintenance of the middle-class. One of the tactics Obama presented to help fight this trend was a raise in the federal minimum wage. This was not a new proposal, as Clinton had also successfully worked toward raising the minimum wage. Championing a raise to

the federal minimum wage included discussions about the working poor, especially those working for the Government.

And as a chief executive, I intend to lead by example. Profitable corporations like Costco see higher wages as the smart way to boost productivity and reduce turnover. We should too. In the coming weeks, I will issue an Executive order requiring Federal contractors to pay their federally funded employees a fair wage of at least 10 dollars and 10 cents an hour. Because if you cook our troops' meals or wash their dishes, you should not have to live in poverty. Obama 2014

Income inequality began threatening to weaken and reduce the middle-class. By highlighting this shift Obama also called attention to the conditions of those working for minimum wage, and rekindled discussion about the working poor. While it did not mark a true return to a full narrative on poverty, it did open the door to the possibility.

#### *Summary*

G.W. Bush and Obama's administrations faced serious threats to the middle-classes economic wellbeing. Terrorism, war, and recessions all placed the middle-class on increasingly fragile ground economically, and reinforced the romantic narrative about the middle-class. As the economy recovered from one challenge, it often quickly faced another. This was presented as a continual perilous journey toward strengthening and expanding the middle-class. While these administrations did discuss setbacks or challenges faced by the middle-class, the narrative was predominantly a progressive one, and for every setback the Presidents tended to offer a reminder of progress made. Poverty, while discussed during both administrations, was no longer a key focus of the speeches. Much like the discussions of the middle-class prior to Reagan's administration, the discussions on poverty were secondary and at times used to highlight the plight of the other vulnerable class. By the last years included in the analysis the discussion began including issues stemming from income inequality. This added a new dimension to the discussion on the vulnerable middle-class as well as poverty.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Presidential speech helps to shape public opinion and is influential in the legislative process. Presidents, through their access to the American people and the prestige of their position, are able to frame and define issues such as poverty and influence the national conversation on those issues. The purpose of this analysis was to examine the narratives that Presidents crafted about poverty, the poor, and the middle-class. This analysis provided a new way of seeing how SOU addresses were used to frame and transform the national discourse about poverty and the poor over the past half century.

Analysis of SOU addresses is uniquely suited for exploring this topic because they provide Presidents an opportunity to present their entire legislative agenda in a single speech. They are mandated by the U.S. Constitution and traditionally delivered in January of each year. For the purpose of this project speeches presented as a substitute for the SOU were also included in the analysis. These speeches are comparable to the SOUs in content and timeframe, and allowed for a more consistent and complete understanding of the Presidents' presentations. While the speeches were studied in their entirety, special attention was paid to the main research topics. Utilizing a pilot study as a launching point provided the project with direction in coding and suggested natural breaks in ideological eras in which the speeches were given.

President Johnson's war on poverty began with a romantic narrative about rescuing the poor. The Government was cast as the romantic hero. State and local governments and individuals were cast as allies in the fight to end poverty. He offered a structural explanation for poverty, and presented tactics that would address the structural inequalities that caused poverty. Over the course of his administration he presented a

narrative of progress, though he admitted to setbacks in funding and administration of the war. The escalation of the war in Vietnam had diverted resources and attention away from the war on poverty. The romantic narrative about the poor only lasted as long as Johnson's administration.

Upon taking office, Nixon presented a tragic narrative of the war on poverty, and called for reforms. Casting the Government as a tragic hero, Nixon advocated welfare reforms and refocusing efforts on crime and other domestic issues, as well as the war in Vietnam. Ford primarily reinforced Nixon's presentation of the tragic narrative, whereas Carter offered a more sympathetic view of the poor, but also advocated welfare reform and reinforced the tragic narrative of the war itself. Subsequent administrations built upon the tragic narrative of the war on poverty, and reinforced the tragic hero casting of the Government. Nixon, Ford, and Carter cast the welfare system itself as the new villain, and described it as harmful to its recipients.

When Reagan took office in 1981 he continued to present a tragic narrative of the war on poverty, but recast the poor as the villains. Highlighting waste and fraud within the system, Reagan cast the poor, especially those receiving benefits, largely as criminals taking advantage of the system. This further stigmatized the poor and reinforced the need for welfare reform. Reagan also began crafting a concurrent narrative about the fragile middle-class casting them as the victims of the poor through their abuse of the welfare system. Presenting the middle-class as vulnerable and in need of assistance, he began promoting tactics and policies to help strengthen and expand the middle-class. Bush was slightly more sympathetic toward the poor, but still championed welfare reform and perpetuated the negative presentation of welfare recipients. He reinforced Reagan's narrative about the middle-class, and began advocating policies and

tactics that would strengthen the middle-class and prioritize them above the needs of the poor.

Clinton's administration passed comprehensive welfare reform in 1996, and effectively ended the narrative of the war on poverty. Once welfare reform had passed, discussions of the poor were in relation to the reforms or as secondary recipients of middle-class centric reforms. Clinton strengthened the emphasis on the middle-class and expanded it to a full romantic narrative. The Government was again cast as a hero, this time to engage in a quest to expand and strengthen the middle-class. This narrative continued through G.W. Bush and Obama's administrations. While the nation faced challenge after challenge, the romantic narrative of the middle-class was presented as progressive and hopeful. G.W. Bush and Obama each discussed poverty during their administrations, but the discussion did not rekindle the war on poverty or a romantic narrative about the poor.

While each President contributed to the reframing of poverty and the poor, some were more effective than others when presenting their definitions. Due at least partially to the political climate in the wake of Nixon's resignation, Ford appears as the least effective at reframing poverty and the poor. Both he and his Vice President were appointed to their positions, which left them with little political capital in their dealings with Congress. The American people's faith in the Government was faltering after Nixon's impeachment trial and resignation, and the distrust was amplified after Ford gave Nixon a full pardon. This proved to be a powerful combination that left Ford unable to effectively advance his narrative and reframing of poverty and the poor beyond reinforcing Nixon's previously established presentation. In contrast, Reagan appears to have been the most effective at reframing poverty and the poor. The combination of personal charisma and acting experience made Reagan a highly effective orator. He rekindled faith in the Government,

and his popularity enhanced his influence with Congress. His framing of poverty, and especially welfare and its recipients, was so effective in that it imposed his frames on subsequent administrations and continues to be influential in how poverty is presented.

The shift from a romantic to tragic narrative led to a significant reframing of both welfare and the poor, which altered the way we discuss poverty, even today. The initial presentation of the poor was as a universally sympathetic group that, whatever the reasons for their poverty, was worthy of assistance. The stigma of poverty existed, but the romantic narrative crafted by Johnson attempted to counter some of the stigma by creating associations between the poor and the average American. This effectively defined poverty as a social problem that needed to be addressed. The shift from a narrative of romance to one of tragedy reinforced the stigma of poverty by reassigning those associations with the average American to associations with waste, fraud, and abuse of the welfare system. This reframing of welfare, achieved through unrelenting critique and attack of the system and its beneficiaries, allowed the Presidents to indirectly vilify the poor through images of their perceived criminal interactions with the system. The social problem of poverty was transformed into the social problem of welfare abuse. This framing of welfare as a metaphor for waste, fraud, and the unworthy poor was so successful that mentions of welfare continue to conjure negative associations in the minds of most Americans. The language used to discuss poverty relief and the poor themselves has contributed to the historical reframing of programs and reinforcement of stereotypes, which led to the end of the war on poverty, and continues to hinder progressive discussion of poverty and the poor, as the vocabulary immediately summons images of welfare queens and food stamp frauds. These are not neutral terms that inspire lively debate, but terms loaded with negative connotations. Because this framing of welfare and the poor invokes such negative reactions, there is a need for either a

reframing of these terms to regain neutrality, or the creation of a new vocabulary to discuss poverty and the poor. Without reclaiming the language or creating it anew, discussions of poverty and the poor will continue to be mired in rhetorically constructed historic frames that allow little room for productive discussion.

Over the course of the analysis I discovered other areas of research beyond the scope of this paper, which merit further exploration. This research was largely descriptive, and adding additional forms of analysis, including quantitative analysis of poverty data, could add nuance and additional objective evidence to the narrative analysis presented. It was also limited to addressing the SOUs and what was contained within, but broadening the data set to include other speeches and Presidential documents to provide a more complete picture on the President's perspectives on poverty and possible motivations for their presentations of poverty and the poor would add to our understanding of the death of the war on poverty. Moreover, this paper did not explore the gendered aspect of welfare images, nor the gendered nature of poverty. As women are the predominant beneficiaries of welfare, exploration of the gendered nature of welfare reform, poverty, and the constructions of the poor would be beneficial for a more nuanced understanding of these issues. It also did not address the intersections between poverty and race, or institutional racism and its effects on the portrayals of welfare and welfare reform. Expanding the timeline for analysis back to the original introduction of programs such as Social Security and welfare would allow for a better understanding of the historical context of the SOUs, and how they were originally framed as compared to their form and emphasis in more recent administrations. Finally, as President Obama began addressing poverty directly in his later SOUs, wage and economic inequality were gaining more public awareness. Thus, extending the research as an ongoing project

might illuminate new definitions and presentations of poverty and the poor, as well as the tactics employed to address poverty.

Analyzing Presidential speeches over the course of 51 SOUs has illuminated the path between declaring an 'unconditional war on poverty' in 1964, to the declaration that "some years ago, the Federal Government declared war on poverty, and poverty won" in 1988 (Johnson 1964, Reagan 1988). This project provided another way to examine the cultural narrative the U.S. has crafted about poverty and the poor. Without examining the ways in which the public definitions of social issues are influenced, we cannot fully understand views and opinions about those issues. Poverty in America has undergone a drastic redefinition since the declaration of the war on poverty. Poverty itself, however, has changed little in its devastating effect on the poor. It is my hope that this research has highlighted the need for new ways to discuss poverty and the poor, and the need for a new vocabulary for those discussions. Johnson stated in 1964 that the richest nation in the world could afford to address poverty, and that still holds true today. However, the reconstruction of poverty as a social problem requires new definitions and key terms. Discussions of income inequality may prove to be the seeds of this discussion, but without refocusing on those at the bottom of the income distribution we risk once again overlooking the poor in favor of the middle-class.

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Jamaica Kennedy earned her Associate of Arts from North Lake College in Irving Texas in 2010. She then transferred to the University of Texas in Arlington where she studied Sociology. She graduated Summa Cum Laude in 2013 earning her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with a focus in Social Psychology and entered the graduate program in sociology. She worked for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology as an Enhanced Graduate Teaching Assistant, a job she loved due to working with an amazing group of professors and because it allowed her the opportunity to be a guest lecturer and teach. After graduation she hopes to put the skills she learned during her education at UTA to teach and help others and find a position at a non-profit organization.