

The Creation of the Anti-Poverty Program
Otherwise Called "The Community Action Program"
in the Three County Metro Area of St. Cloud*

It was the Roman philosopher Cicero who said if one doesn't know where he came from it is difficult to tell where he is going to go. I have been asked to comment on the founding of the Tri-County Community Action program in Saint Cloud some sixteen years ago. It's current budget is \$4.8 million, almost as much as the entire City budget in 1964.

I was still a newly elected Mayor in late Fall of that year when I assembled in City Hall a group of educators who were interested in utilizing the programs the Johnson Administration was putting together to fight poverty. Included in this group was: Father Robert Schulzetenberg, Superintendent of Schools, St. Cloud Diocese; James Michie, Superintendent of Schools, St. Cloud School District; John Weismann, Dean of Students, St. Cloud State College; Father Richard Leisen, Director, Catholic Charities; Lloyd Haupt, Director, St. Cloud Children's Home; and Francis Lynch, Director, St. Cloud branch of the Minnesota Employment Service.

Francis Lynch and Father Bob were to die sudden deaths within a few years time, but both were catalysts and Francis Lynch became the first chairman of the Board of what soon became Tri-Cap, a three-county community action program, one of the first multi-jurisdictional CAPS in the Country and the first CAP in Minnesota outside the Twin Cities.

The battle was uphill. John Scott, a recently retired army major, agreed to take the job as first director although there were no funds. The City Council of St. Cloud, controlled by Republicans refused my request for office space in city facilities. Both problems were solved through improvisation. Using executive discretion, I first assigned Scott an office in the police station and then assigned a house on Third Avenue South, one that the City had condemned for future public use. City employees on their own time renovated the basics of that house and equipped it for occupancy. I remember using money from my personal expense account and it was added to by the Diocese of St. Cloud and the St. Cloud School district. John Scott took an IOU on his salary and the CAP was off.

It took patience. It was not until May of 1965, five months later, that the first grant was received; \$13,100 to survey community needs. St. Cloud was again the first outstate City in Minnesota to receive such a grant. By this time, grant requests totaling more than one-half million had been submitted by Tri-Cap to Washington. Our three area colleges received an initial grant of \$19,000 for work study; and the Albany, Becker, and Sauk Rapids School districts followed with such grants.

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E.L. Henry, Mayor 1964-70

On July 1, 1965, in a major breakthrough, \$238,900 was received for 527 youth corps jobs in the tri-county area. Foster grandparents program was next funded at the Children's Home. By the end of the first full year of operation, December 1965, Senator Walter Mondale, then touring the State, termed the St. Cloud program "among the most advanced and responsible in the area".

In June, 1966, another \$245,000 was received for neighborhood youth corps. And so it went: Youth corps, work study, head start, medicare alert, project share, farm family counselling, home health aids, Vista, you name it. The tri-county area was off and running with the greatest galaxy of programs, all generated at the grass roots, ever conceived to help the poverty-stricken rise.

Concept of the CAP Programs

The concept of the CAP programs was a revolutionary one in American history. It attempted to alleviate poverty by directly involving the poor in designing and operating programs for their own benefit. It by-passed the traditional welfare bureaucracy that had been created in the Thirties and it operated outside the county welfare systems in the United States. It was based on the theory that the traditional welfare system had tacitly accepted permanent poverty as the normal state for millions of citizens and could do nothing more than act as a palliative and not a preventive program for poverty.

The result was tension between the traditional welfare bureaucracy which was being by-passed and frequently with City Hall politicians who wanted to control the funds rather than have them go directly into a new local agency, CAP, not controlled by them. (Not the case in St. Cloud where the Mayor approved and supported the program.) Ultimately, the traditional agencies won and asserted control over the Office of Economic Opportunity. The poor were still represented, but the programs were dictated from old agencies in Washington and local officials began to exert more control over the local administration of such programs. The poor were not eliminated from participation, but the control by them over their own programs which was visualized under Kennedy, took second place by 1965 to agency directives from Washington.

Impact in the Tri-County Area

The impact of the new CAP programs in the St. Cloud area cannot be overestimated in the period of the Sixties. Throughout the tri-county area, several thousand people were involved directly in programs designed to provide relief for those most in need; and training and educational work for those who could profit by it. It directly affected the economy, the quality of life for many, and it broke new paths for future intergovernmental and interinstitutional cooperation.

(A) Economic Effects

While CAP programs were not the only ones launched in and around St. Cloud aimed at helping the poor (St. Cloud launched several types of low income housing, for instance), they did provide a strong shot of adrenalin for the local economy. During the mid-Sixties, St. Cloud, as one example, was just beginning to stir. Surveys commissioned by City Hall in 1964 revealed a listless economy; poor wages; below average educational levels; few opportunities for youth; and an ignoring of the elderly. In such an economy with excess capacity, the injection of millions of dollars within a six year period of time had the predictable effects of Keynesian economic theory; the money went into the hands of those most apt to spend it quickly; it was spent and respent with multiplier effects; and the income generation resulting from the spending played no small part in bringing St. Cloud's economic growth within a decade to new, higher levels and the City to an All-American status.

(B) Inter-Governmental; Inter-Institutional Cooperation

There was another pathbreaking effect which hindsight now reveals. St. Cloud was, and is, one of the few cities in the United States, perhaps the only one, split up by the converging boundary lines of three counties. It had to become a tri-county program. But it also became an inter-institutional program including churches, several public school districts, and a large parochial school system, not to mention three colleges and several municipalities. It was a rehearsal for later cooperative endeavors such as United Way; the metro-transportation system; the regional disposal system; the regional library system; and the regional planning districts later laid on the area by the state legislature.

(C) Quality of Life

These were the tangible and quantifiable impacts. One cannot overlook the less visible results of the program: restored hope of the poor; education of pre-school children under headstart; comfort to the homebound; utilization and revitalization of the aging through programs like the "grand-parent program" at the St. Cloud Children's Home; and a dozen other imaginative thrusts that collectively improved the quality of life for overlooked human beings.

It was, as I remember it, a period of hope and enthusiasm and creativity; not all successful, to be sure, and not unmarked by controversy and minor power struggles. But for the first time in the history of the three county area, the poor were mobilized and entrusted with some control over their lives. I would hazard a guess also that the spectre of competition with a new type of welfare system set the traditional welfare bureaucracy on a stint of self-examination and more sensitive responsiveness towards its clientele.

It was one of those rare moments in history when some people caught just a glimpse of what a community might be like for those who historically had been relegated to impotence in the United States. For a moment in time, the words of Bob Kennedy seared the minds of activists: "Others see things as they are and ask, 'Why?'. I see things as they could be and ask, 'Why not?'"

Where Are We Today: 1981?

Today we are beginning to piece together the fragments of a counter-revolution. Elements who have hated the Roosevelt reforms of the Thirties and Forties have attracted the support of millions of blue collar workers who economically have become middle class. We are, at the minimum, in a period of social readjustment. Even if inflation were not the major problem it is, we would be experiencing a major shakeup in social programs---for the Reagan strategy is not merely a palliative for inflation but a philosophical counterrevolution that stresses much less of a role for the public sector and a much greater role for the private one. It is a trickle-down theory of social improvement supported by the respectability of supply-side economics. His program is a mixture of economic expedience with philosophic conviction: counter-inflation and counter-government.

And there are elements of validity in both. One does not have to hate the poor to admit this. Inexorably in a democratic society with a political party system such as we have, politicians vie with each other to raise the expectations of the people. Eventually these expectations outrun both the resources of society and the administrative know-how to carry the programs out.

This combination of an irresponsible party system, a growing limitation of resources; and the inability of administrative science to fulfill social goals, resulted in a huge and perhaps uncontrollable bureaucracy which in turn produced an unacceptable level of waste, graft, and inefficiency--at least as perceived by the American voter. Worsening this condition was pervasive inflation, certainly not wholly attributable to military spending but certainly exacerbated by it. Some say we are testing DeTocquevill's observation that a nation can have equality or freedom but not both.

And so the "counter revolution" feeds on these perceived and real developments in the American nation. And, ironically, it is the conservatives today who are willing to quote Thomas Jefferson's statement that each generation must have it's own revolution. Jefferson meant simply that institutions (read, also, "programs") which are devised by man as solutions to social problems become ossified. As the nature of the problem changes, the solutions do not and they, therefore, become irrelevant. The Democratic party which triggered most of the modern social programs, in a moment of self-flagellation, is now saying, "We didn't keep the solutions updated and they became partially, at least, irrelevant to the problems."

Weaknesses in the Reagan Strategy

History will have to determine who is right. I think, however, that some criticism can be offered now that bears on the Reagan approach, criticism that many would not consider shooting from the hip. Reagan advisers, some of who possess precious little previous experience in government, are approaching the problem with some irresponsibility, first by cutting back with a meat cleaver and secondly by trying to do it overnight. Underlying such unseemly haste are three assumptions that I had thought were put to rest long ago plus:

- (1) that government has no responsibility to assist the unfortunate in society. This is straight out of the lexicon of Adam Smith and the classical economists of the 18th century. It is not an economic policy. It is a political theory.
- (2) that government investment unlike private investment is really not productive.
- (3) that the middle class has suffered relative to the benefits given the poor. Poppycock! The middle class has enjoyed and is still enjoying and will continue to enjoy vastly more subsidies and tax concessions from the system than those whose lunch programs, educational assistance, and other help is being crippled.

Also, I fear that some of the lessons of the past are being glossed over in Washington today:

- (1) we are forgetting that there is fallout from private production which can only be handled by government: pollution, unemployment, industrial injury, periodic unemployment.
- (2) we are forgetting there are types of investment which only government can do well such as roads, highways, public parks.
- (3) we have forgotten the lesson of history that social justice left to the unpredictability of the private market place withers and dies.
- (4) we have forgotten that though all are equal in the eyes of the law, that not all have the capacity to claim that equality. Legal aids?
- (5) we have forgotten that short run economies may be long run indulgence--forcing mothers with small children into the market place; we have forgotten that not all people who don't work, can work; and that if we do put mothers into jobs that eliminating centers to care for their children makes the job a mockery.
- (6) we have forgotten that the really poor have no voice in running society, and that the ability to eliminate programs for them without outcry does not mean serious harm is not being done.

- (7) we have forgotten that government like a private corporation has to practice preventive maintenance in its plant and its people: manpower training, public transit, and pollution control in its parks, rivers, lakes, and air.
- (8) And we may be forgetting that private goods and services are not always better than public ones: playgrounds versus yachts.

Good Public Policy No Total Solution

We have serious economic problems and it is important to deal with them. Inflation may hurt the poor more than the affluent, as claimed. But the obsession of both Democratic and Republican administrations alike with economic growth threatens to disarm us philosophically and morally. The Country has had lopsided priorities for some decades now. A growing GNP says nothing about the quality of what we produce nor about the fulfillment of our responsibilities in distributing it. We have become accustomed to accepting private frills and ignoring public necessities; to satisfying artificially generated wants and callously overlooking elemental human needs. Somewhere along the way, we may have forgotten that production is not an end in itself, but a means to help humanize man. Perhaps we have listened too much of late to economic statisticians and too little to moral philosophers.

It is difficult for me, for instance, to understand how we can cut back on education, health, scientific research, medicaid, school lunch, clean air, but not on other things that absorb our resources. One is prompted to ask why depilatories, deodorants, and laxatives are more important than education, clean rivers, and healthy children? It is difficult to understand why we spend almost as much on pet food as for food stamp programs; as much for cosmetics and hair preparations as for grants to mass transit; and more on liquor and tobacco than on higher education. It is difficult to understand why waste and corruption, tax loopholes, and a bloated bureaucracy cannot be sacrificed instead of programs for the underprivileged.

People are asking why, with the most productive economy in the world; why, with the highest living standards in history; why, with the freest economy in the family of nations, we cannot simultaneously find a balance between our approach to military defense, inflation, and our social and moral obligations?

But this fundamental weakness in our system of priorities is one that the Reagan economic plan by itself cannot remedy even if its theoretical underpinnings were sound. The causes run far deeper than economics and they are more than public policy alone can rectify. They require, in fact, a fundamental reawakening of our moral sensitivities and the reinvigoration of those institutions that traditionally have set our values--the family, the Church, the educational system, and of course, the political parties. Reagan's program is a bandaid on the cancer that afflicts society and ironically many of the proposed cutbacks strike at the vitals of the very institutions that must be kept healthy to do the job.

What Lies Ahead?

The original CAP programs under the Economic Opportunity Act represented an idealistic chapter in American social history as well as a political fluke that slipped past a preoccupied Congress.

They did, however, reflect President Johnson's image of a Great Society: "It is a place," said the President, "where the City of Man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce, but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community." I was privileged to be a part of that effort to create such a society. That great experiment now seems to be foundering on the shoals of resource scarcity and a limited social dream.

I think the prospects of the counter revolution are quite finite. The spirit of social compassion, healthy optimism, and collective concerns that Franklin Roosevelt articulated so well is not dead in this nation; only temporarily suspended in a fit of preoccupation with some pressing economic problems. This social compassion is rather a part of the American character and will survive. The nation will come back with new social solutions---more effectively administered, and, perhaps, guided by more realistic expectations from chastened politicians.

In the meantime, as Alan Pifer, head of the Carnegie Foundation, pointed out recently, we will have to turn for help to the business community which played such an important role in Reagan's election and in staffing his Administration. Business will have to become vastly more committed than it has been with social goals and with financial support for them. A start would be to utilize to the full their allowed deductions for contributions to eleemosynary activities such as education. I would add to Pifer's comment that traditional voluntary associations such as Churches, United Ways, and others will have to share the burden being doffed by the Federal Government; and local and state governments to whom Reagan wants to shift responsibilities will also have to become more sensitive and more ingenious in their programming. These can help blunt the worst impact of the Reagan cutbacks but not prevent widespread hardship.

The fact that poverty, inequality, and unemployment still exist does not mean that the social programs of the 60's and 70's have failed. It means rather that the agenda of social reform is far from finished and that we need to examine carefully how we are to effectuate the rest of it and what our timing will be.

It would be easy in the climate of our times to relegate Tri-Cap to the ranks of the forgotten. We must not do that, and anniversary celebrations are ways of reminding ourselves of the good things in our past. Tri-Cap has provided over its fifteen year span in this community a legacy for future generations, a reminder that social ideals can be translated into social action. It also has generated a collection of social experiments and experience, and a font of social wisdom that this community and others like it can ignore only at considerable risk to social health and stability.