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## **The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty**

**The theory here, to force change through chaos, was among the most provocative of the 1960s.**

*From the Monday, May 2, 1966 issue of [The Nation](#)*

How can the poor be organized to press for relief from poverty? How can a broad-based movement be developed and the current disarray of activist forces be halted? These questions confront, and confound, activists today. It is our purpose to advance a strategy which affords the basis for a convergence of civil rights organizations, militant anti-poverty groups and the poor. If this strategy were implemented, a political crisis would result that could lead to legislation for a guaranteed annual income and thus an end to poverty.

The strategy is based on the fact that a vast discrepancy exists between the benefits to which people are entitled under public welfare programs and the sums which they actually receive. This gulf is not recognized in a society that is wholly and self-righteously oriented toward getting people off the welfare rolls. It is widely known, for example, that nearly 8 million persons (half of them white) now subsist on welfare, but it is not generally known that for every person on the rolls at least one more probably meets existing criteria of eligibility but is not obtaining assistance.

The discrepancy is not an accident stemming from bureaucratic inefficiency; rather, it is an integral feature of the welfare system which, if challenged, would precipitate a profound financial and political crisis. The force for that challenge, and the strategy we propose, is a massive drive to recruit the poor onto the welfare rolls.

The distribution of public assistance has been a local and state responsibility, and that accounts in large part for the abysmal character of welfare practices. Despite the growing involvement of federal agencies in supervisory and reimbursement arrangements, state and local community forces are still decisive. The poor are most visible and proximate in the local community; antagonism toward them (and toward the agencies which are implicated with them) has always, therefore, been more intense locally than at the federal level. In recent years, local communities have increasingly felt class and ethnic friction generated by competition for neighborhoods, schools, jobs and political power. Public welfare systems are under the constant stress of conflict and opposition, made only sharper by the rising costs to localities of public aid. And, to accommodate this pressure, welfare practice everywhere has become more restrictive than welfare statute; much of the time it verges on lawlessness. Thus, public welfare systems try to keep their budgets down and their rolls low by failing to inform people of the rights available to them; by intimidating

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and shaming them to the degree that they are reluctant either to apply or to press claims, and by arbitrarily denying benefits to those who are eligible.

A series of welfare drives in large cities would, we believe, impel action on a new federal program to distribute income, eliminating the present public welfare system and alleviating the abject poverty which it perpetrates. Widespread campaigns to register the eligible poor for welfare aid, and to help existing recipients obtain their full benefits, would produce bureaucratic disruption in welfare agencies and fiscal disruption in local and state governments. These disruptions would generate severe political strains, and deepen existing divisions among elements in the big-city Democratic coalition: the remaining white middle class, the white working-class ethnic groups and the growing minority poor. To avoid a further weakening of that historic coalition, a national Democratic administration would be con-strained to advance a federal solution to poverty that would override local welfare failures, local class and racial conflicts and local revenue dilemmas. By the internal disruption of local bureaucratic practices, by the furor over public welfare poverty, and by the collapse of current financing arrangements, powerful forces can be generated for major economic reforms at the national level.

The ultimate objective of this strategy--to wipe out poverty by establishing a guaranteed annual income--will be questioned by some. Because the ideal of individual social and economic mobility has deep roots, even activists seem reluctant to call for national programs to eliminate poverty by the outright redistribution of income. Instead, programs are demanded to enable people to become economically competitive. But such programs are of no use to millions of today's poor. For example, one-third of the 35 million poor Americans are in families headed by females; these heads of family cannot be aided appreciably by job retraining, higher minimum wages, accelerated rates of economic growth, or employment in public works projects. Nor can the 5 million aged who are poor, nor those whose poverty results from the ill health of the wage earner. Programs to enhance individual mobility will chiefly benefit the very young, if not the as yet unborn. Individual mobility is no answer to the question of how to abolish the massive problem of poverty now.

It has never been the full answer. If many people in the past have found their way up from poverty by the path of individual mobility, many others have taken a different route. Organized labor stands out as a major example. Although many American workers never yielded their dreams of individual achievement, they accepted and practiced the principle that each can benefit only as the status of workers as a whole is elevated. They bargained for collective mobility, not for individual mobility; to promote their fortunes in the aggregate, not to promote the prospects of one worker over another. And if each finally found himself in the same relative economic relationship to his fellows as when he began, it was nevertheless clear that all were infinitely better off. That fact has sustained the labor movement in the face of a counter pull from the ideal of individual achievement.

But many of the contemporary poor will not rise from poverty by organizing to bargain collectively. They either are not in the labor force or are in such marginal and dispersed occupations (e.g., domestic servants) that it is extremely difficult to organize them. Compared with other groups, then, many of today's poor cannot secure a redistribution of income by organizing within the institution of private enterprise. A federal program of income redistribution has become necessary to elevate the poor en masse from poverty.

Several ways have been proposed for redistributing income through the federal government. It is not our purpose here to assess the relative merits of these plans, which are still undergoing debate and clarification. Whatever mechanism is eventually adopted,

however, it must include certain features if it is not merely to perpetuate in a new guise the present evils of the public welfare system.

First, adequate levels of income must be assured. (Public welfare levels are astonishingly low; indeed, states typically define a "minimum" standard of living and then grant only a percentage of it, so that families are held well below what the government itself officially defines as the poverty level.) Furthermore, income should be distributed without requiring that recipients first divest themselves of their assets, as public welfare now does, thereby pauperizing families as a condition of sustenance.

Second, the right to income must be guaranteed, or the oppression of the welfare poor will not be eliminated. Because benefits are conditional under the present public welfare system, submission to arbitrary governmental power is regularly made the price of sustenance. People have been coerced into attending literacy classes or participating in medical or vocational rehabilitation regimes, on pain of having their benefits terminated. Men are forced into labor on virtually any terms lest they forfeit their welfare aid. One can prize literacy, health and work, while still vigorously opposing the right of government to compel compliance with these values.

Conditional benefits thus result in violations of civil liberties throughout the nation, and in a pervasive oppression of the poor. And these violations are not less real because the impulse leading to them is altruistic and the agency is professional. If new systems of income distribution continue to permit the professional bureaucracies to choose when to give and when to withhold financial relief, the poor will once again be surrendered to an arrangement in which their rights are diminished in the name of overcoming their vices. Those who lead an attack on the welfare system must therefore be alert to the pitfalls of inadequate but placating reforms which give the appearance of victory to what is in truth defeat.

How much economic force can be mobilized by this strategy? This question is not easy to answer because few studies have been conducted of people who are not receiving public assistance even though they may be eligible. For the purposes of this presentation, a few facts about New York City may be suggestive. Since practices elsewhere are generally acknowledged to be even more restrictive, the estimates of unused benefits which follow probably yield a conservative estimate of the potential force of the strategy set forth in this article.

Basic assistance for food and rent: The most striking characteristic of public welfare practice is that a great many people who appear to be eligible for assistance are not on the welfare rolls. The average monthly total of New York City residents receiving assistance in 1959 was 325,771, but according to the 1960 census, 716,000 persons (unrelated or in families) appeared to be subsisting on incomes at or below the prevailing welfare eligibility levels (e.g \$2,070 for a family of four). In that same year, 539,000 people subsisted on incomes less than 80 per cent of the welfare minimums, and 200,000 lived alone or in families on incomes reported to be less than half of eligibility levels. Thus it appears that for every person on welfare in 1959, at least one more was eligible.

The results of two surveys of selected areas in Manhattan support the contention that many people subsist on incomes below welfare eligibility levels. One of these, conducted by Greenleigh Associates in 1964 in an urban-renewal area on New York's upper West Side, found 9 per cent of those not on the rolls were in such acute need that they appeared to qualify for emergency assistance. The study showed, further, that a substantial number of

families that were not in a "critical" condition would probably have qualified for supplemental assistance.

The other survey, conducted in 1961 by Mobilization for Youth, had similar findings. The area from which its sample was drawn, 67 square blocks on the lower East Side, is a poor one, but by no means the poorest in New York City. Yet 13 per cent of the total sample who were not on the welfare rolls reported incomes falling below the prevailing welfare schedules for food and rent.

There is no reason to suppose that the discrepancy between those eligible for and those receiving assistance has narrowed much in the past few years. The welfare rolls have gone up, to be sure, but so have eligibility levels. Since the economic circumstances of impoverished groups in New York have not improved appreciably in the past few years, each such rise increases the number of people who are potentially eligible for some degree of assistance.

Even if one allows for the possibility that family-income figures are grossly underestimated by the census, the financial implications of the proposed strategy are still very great. In 1965, the monthly average of persons receiving cash assistance in New York was 490,000, at a total cost of \$440 million; the rolls have now risen above 500,000, so that costs will exceed \$500 million in 1966. An increase in the rolls of a mere 20 per cent would cost an already overburdened municipality some \$100 million.

Special grants: Public assistance recipients in New York are also entitled to receive "nonrecurring" grants for clothing, household equipment and furniture-including washing machines, refrigerators, beds and bedding, tables and chairs. It hardly needs to be noted that most impoverished families have grossly inadequate clothing and household furnishings. The Greenleigh study, for example, found that 52 per cent of the families on public assistance lacked anything approaching adequate furniture. This condition results because almost nothing is spent on special grants in New York. In October, 1965, a typical month, the Department of Welfare spent only \$2.50 per recipient for heavy clothing and \$1.30 for household furnishings. Taken together, grants of this kind amounted in 1965 to a mere \$40 per person, or a total of \$20 million for the entire year. Considering the real needs of families, the successful demand for full entitlements could multiply these expenditures tenfold or more and that would involve the disbursement of many millions of dollars indeed.

One must be cautious in making generalizations about the prospects for this strategy in any jurisdiction unless the structure of welfare practices has been examined in some detail. We can, however, cite other studies conducted in other places to show that New York practices are not atypical. In Detroit, for example, Greenleigh Associates studied a large sample of households in a low-income district in 1965. Twenty per cent were already receiving assistance, but 35 per cent more were judged to need it. Although the authors made no strict determination of the eligibility of these families under the laws of Michigan, they believed that "larger numbers of persons were eligible than receiving." A good many of these families did not know that public assistance was available; others thought they would be deemed ineligible; not a few were ashamed or afraid to ask.

Similar deprivations have been shown in nation-wide studies. In 1963, the federal government carried out a survey based on a national sample of 5,500 families whose benefits under Aid to Dependent Children had been terminated. Thirty-four per cent of these cases were officially in need of income at the point of closing: this was true of 30 per cent of the white and 44 per cent of the Negro cases. The chief basis for termination given in local department records was "other reasons" (i.e., other than improvement in financial

condition, which would make dependence on welfare unnecessary). Upon closer examination, these "other reasons" turned out to be "unsuitable home" (i.e., the presence of illegitimate children), "failure to comply with departmental regulations" or "refusal to take legal action against a putative father." (Negroes were especially singled out for punitive action on the ground that children were not being maintained in "suitable homes.") The amounts of money that people are deprived of by these injustices are very great.

In order to generate a crisis, the poor must obtain benefits which they have forfeited. Until now, they have been inhibited from asserting claims by self-protective devices within the welfare system: its capacity to limit information, to intimidate applicants, to demoralize recipients, and arbitrarily to deny lawful claims.

Ignorance of welfare rights can be attacked through a massive educational campaign. Brochures describing benefits in simple, clear language, and urging people to seek their full entitlements, should be distributed door to door in tenements and public housing projects, and deposited in stores, schools, churches and civic centers. Advertisements should be placed in newspapers; spot announcements should be made on radio. Leaders of social, religious, fraternal and political groups in the slums should also be enlisted to recruit the eligible to the rolls. The fact that the campaign is intended to inform people of their legal rights under a government program, that it is a civic education drive, will lend it legitimacy.

But information alone will not suffice. Organizers will have to become advocates in order to deal effectively with improper rejections and terminations. The advocate's task is to appraise the circumstances of each case, to argue its merits before welfare, to threaten legal action if satisfaction is not given. In some cases, it will be necessary to contest decisions by requesting a "fair hearing" before the appropriate state supervisory agency; it may occasionally be necessary to sue for redress in the courts. Hearings and court actions will require lawyers, many of whom, in cities like New York, can be recruited on a voluntary basis, especially under the banner of a movement to end poverty by a strategy of asserting legal rights. However, most cases will not require an expert knowledge of law, but only of welfare regulations; the rules can be learned by laymen, including welfare recipients themselves (who can help to man "information and advocacy" centers). To aid workers in these centers, handbooks should be prepared describing welfare rights and the tactics to employ in claiming them.

Advocacy must be supplemented by organized demonstrations to create a climate of militancy that will overcome the invidious and immobilizing attitudes which many potential recipients hold toward being "on welfare." In such a climate, many more poor people are likely to become their own advocates and will not need to rely on aid from organizers.

As the crisis develops, it will be important to use the mass media to inform the broader liberal community about the inefficiencies and injustices of welfare. For example, the system will not be able to process many new applicants because of cumbersome and often unconstitutional investigatory procedures (which cost 20c for every dollar disbursed). As delays mount, so should the public demand that a simplified affidavit supplant these procedures, so that the poor may certify to their condition. If the system reacts by making the proof of eligibility more difficult, the demand should be made that the Department of Health, Education and Welfare dispatch "eligibility registrars" to enforce federal statutes governing local programs. And throughout the crisis, the mass media should be used to advance arguments for a new federal income distribution program.

Although new resources in organizers and funds would have to be developed to mount this campaign, a variety of conventional agencies in the large cities could also be drawn upon

for help. The idea of "welfare rights" has begun to attract attention in many liberal circles. A number of organizations, partly under the aegis of the "war against poverty," are developing information and advocacy services for low-income people [see "*Poverty, Injustice and the Welfare State*" by Richard A. Cloward and Richard M. Elman, *The Nation*, issues of February 28, 1966 and March 7, 1966]. It is not likely that these organizations will directly participate in the present strategy, for obvious political reasons. But whether they participate or not, they constitute a growing network of resources to which people can be referred for help in establishing and maintaining entitlements. In the final analysis, it does not matter who helps people to get on the rolls or to get additional entitlements, so long as the job is done.

Since this plan deals with problems of great immediacy in the lives of the poor, it should motivate some of them to involve themselves in regular organizational activities. Welfare recipients, chiefly ADC mothers, are already forming federations, committees and councils in cities across the nation; in Boston, New York, Newark, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles, to mention a few. Such groups typically focus on obtaining full entitlements for existing recipients rather than on recruiting new recipients, and they do not yet comprise a national movement. But their very existence attests to a growing readiness among ghetto residents to act against public welfare.

To generate an expressly political movement, cadres of aggressive organizers would have to come from the civil rights movement and the churches, from militant low-income organizations like those formed by the Industrial Areas Foundation (that is, by Saul Alinsky), and from other groups on the Left. These activists should be quick to see the difference between programs to redress individual grievances and a large-scale social-action campaign for national policy reform.

Movements that depend on involving masses of poor people have generally failed in America. Why would the proposed strategy to engage the poor succeed?

First, this plan promises immediate economic benefits. This is a point of some importance because, whereas America's poor have not been moved in any number by radical political ideologies, they have sometimes been moved by their economic interests. Since radical movements in America have rarely been able to provide visible economic incentives, they have usually failed to secure mass participation of any kind. The conservative "business unionism" of organized labor is explained by this fact, for membership enlarged only as unionism paid off in material benefits. Union leaders have understood that their strength derives almost entirely from their capacity to provide economic rewards to members. Although leaders have increasingly acted in political spheres, their influence has been directed chiefly to matters of governmental policy affecting the well-being of organized workers. The same point is made by the experience of rent strikes in Northern cities. Their organizers were often motivated by radical ideologies, but tenants have been attracted by the promise that housing improvements would quickly be made if they withheld their rent.

Second, for this strategy to succeed, one need not ask more of most of the poor than that they claim lawful benefits. Thus the plan has the extraordinary capability of yielding mass influence without mass participation, at least as the term "participation" is ordinarily understood. Mass influence in this case stems from the consumption of benefits and does not require that large groups of people be involved in regular organizational roles.

Moreover, this kind of mass influence is cumulative because benefits are continuous. Once eligibility for basic food and rent grants is established, the drain on local resources persists indefinitely. Other movements have failed precisely because they could not produce

continuous and cumulative influence. In the Northern rent strikes, for example, tenant participation depended largely on immediate grievances; as soon as landlords made the most minimal repairs, participation fell away and with it the impact of the movement. Efforts to revive tenant participation by organizing demonstrations around broader housing issues (e.g., the expansion of public housing) did not succeed because the incentives were not immediate.

Third, the prospects for mass influence are enhanced because this plan provides a practical basis for coalition between poor whites and poor Negroes. Advocates of low-income movements have not been able to suggest how poor whites and poor Negroes can be united in an expressly lower-class movement. Despite pleas of some Negro leaders for joint action on programs requiring integration, poor whites have steadfastly resisted making common cause with poor Negroes. By contrast, the benefits of the present plan are as great for whites as for Negroes. In the big cities, at least, it does not seem likely that poor whites, whatever their prejudices against either Negroes or public welfare, will refuse to participate when Negroes aggressively claim benefits that are unlawfully denied to them as well. One salutary consequence of public information campaigns to acquaint Negroes with their rights is that many whites will be made aware of theirs. Even if whites prefer to work through their own organizations and leaders, the consequences will be equivalent to joining with Negroes. For if the object is to focus attention on the need for new economic measures by producing a crisis over the dole, anyone who insists upon extracting maximum benefits from public welfare is in effect part of a coalition and is contributing to the cause.

The ultimate aim of this strategy is a new program for direct income distribution. What reason is there to expect that the federal government will enact such legislation in response to a crisis in the welfare system?

We ordinarily think of major legislation as taking form only through established electoral processes. We tend to overlook the force of crisis in precipitating legislative reform, partly because we lack a theoretical framework by which to understand the impact of major disruptions.

By crisis, we mean a publicly visible disruption in some institutional sphere. Crisis can occur spontaneously (e.g., riots) or as the intended result of tactics of demonstration and protest which either generate institutional disruption or bring unrecognized disruption to public attention. Public trouble is a political liability, it calls for action by political leaders to stabilize the situation. Because crisis usually creates or exposes conflict, it threatens to produce cleavages in a political consensus which politicians will ordinarily act to avert.

Although crisis impels political action, it does not itself determine the selection of specific solutions. Political leaders will try to respond with proposals which work to their advantage in the electoral process. Unless group cleavages form around issues and demands, the politician has great latitude and tends to proffer only the minimum action required to quell disturbances without risking existing electoral support. Spontaneous disruptions, such as riots, rarely produce leaders who articulate demands; thus no terms are imposed, and political leaders are permitted to respond in ways that merely restore a semblance of stability without offending other groups in a coalition.

When, however, a crisis is defined by its participants--or by other activated groups--as a matter of clear issues and preferred solutions, terms are imposed on the politicians' bid for their support. Whether political leaders then design solutions to reflect these terms depends on a twofold calculation: first, the impact of the crisis and the issues it raises on existing

alignments and, second, the gains or losses in support to be expected as a result of a proposed resolution.

As to the impact on existing alignments, issues exposed by a crisis may activate new groups, thus altering the balance of support and opposition on the issues; or it may polarize group sentiments, altering the terms which must be offered to insure the support of given constituent groups. In framing resolutions, politicians are more responsive to group shifts and are more likely to accommodate to the terms imposed when electoral coalitions threatened by crisis are already uncertain or weakening. In other words, the politician responds to group demands, not only by calculating the magnitude of electoral gains and losses, but by assessing the impact of the resolution on the stability of existing or potential coalitions. Political leaders are especially responsive to group shifts when the terms of settlement can be framed so as to shore up an existing coalition, or as a basis for the development of new and more stable alignments, without jeopardizing existing support. Then, indeed, the calculation of net gain is most secure.

The legislative reforms of the depression years, for example, were impelled not so much by organized interests exercised through regular electoral processes as by widespread economic crisis. That crisis precipitated the disruption of the regionally based coalitions underlying the old national parties. During the realignments of 1932, a new Democratic coalition was formed, based heavily on urban working-class groups. Once in power, the national Democratic leadership proposed and implemented the economic reforms of the New Deal. Although these measures were a response to the imperative of economic crisis, the types of measures enacted were designed to secure and stabilize the new Democratic coalition.

The civil rights movement, to take a recent case, also reveals the relationship of crisis and electoral conditions in producing legislative reform. The crisis in the South took place in the context of a weakening North-South Democratic coalition. The strains in that coalition were first evident in the Dixiecrat desertion of 1948, and continued through the Eisenhower years as the Republicans gained ground in the Southern states. Democratic party leaders at first tried to hold the dissident South by warding off the demands of enlarging Negro constituencies in Northern cities. Thus for two decades the national Democratic Party campaigned on strongly worded civil rights planks but enacted only token measures. The civil rights movement forced the Democrats' hand: a crumbling Southern partnership was forfeited, and major civil rights legislation was put forward, designed to insure the support of Northern Negroes and liberal elements in the Democratic coalition. That coalition emerged strong from the 1964 election, easily able to overcome the loss of Southern states to Goldwater. At the same time, the enacted legislation, particularly the Voting Rights Act, laid the ground for a new Southern Democratic coalition of moderate whites and the hitherto untapped reservoir of Southern Negro voters.

The electoral context which made crisis effective in the South is also to be found in the big cities of the nation today. Deep tensions have developed among groups comprising the political coalitions of the large cities--the historic stronghold of the Democratic Party. As a consequence, urban politicians no longer turn in the vote to national Democratic candidates with unflinching regularity. The marked defections revealed in the elections of the 1950s and which continued until the Johnson landslide of 1964 are a matter of great concern to the national party. Precisely because of this concern, a strategy to exacerbate still further the strains in the urban coalition can be expected to evoke a response from national leaders.

The weakening of the urban coalition is a result of many basic changes in the relationship of local party leadership to its constituents. First, the political machine, the distinctive and



traditional mechanism for forging alliances among competing groups in the city, is now virtually defunct in most cities. Successive waves of municipal reform have deprived political leaders of control over the public resources--jobs, contracts, services and favors--which machine politicians formerly dispensed to voters in return for electoral support. Conflicts among elements in the urban Democratic coalition, once held together politically because each secured a share of these benefits, cannot now be so readily contained. And as the means of placating competing groups have diminished, tensions along ethnic and class lines have multiplied. These tensions are being intensified by the encroachments of an enlarging ghetto population on jobs, schools and residential areas. Big-city mayors are thus caught between antagonistic working-class ethnic groups, the remaining middle class, and the rapidly enlarging minority poor.

Second, there are discontinuities in the relationship between the urban party apparatus and its ghetto constituents which have so far remained unexposed but which a welfare crisis would force into view. The ghetto vote has been growing rapidly and has so far returned overwhelming Democratic majorities. Nevertheless, this voting bloc is not fully integrated in the party apparatus, either through the representation of its leaders or the accommodation of its interests.

While the urban political apparatus includes members of new minority groups, these groups are by no means represented according to their increasing proportions in the population. More important, elected representation alone is not an adequate mechanism for the expression of group interests. Influence in urban politics is won not only at the polls but through the sustained activity of organized interests--such as labor unions, home-owner associations and business groups. These groups keep watch over the complex operations of municipal agencies, recognizing issues and regularly asserting their point of view through meetings with public officials, appearances at public hearings and the like, and by exploiting a whole array of channels of influence on government. Minority constituencies--at least the large proportion of them that are poor--are not regular participants in the various institutional spheres where organized interest groups typically develop. Thus the interests of the mass of minority poor are not protected by associations which make their own or other political leaders responsive by continuously calling them to account. Urban party organizations have become, in consequence, more an avenue for the personal advancement of minority political leaders than a channel for the expression of minority-group interests. And the big-city mayors, struggling to preserve an uneasy urban consensus, have thus been granted the slack to evade the conflict-generating interests of the ghetto. A crisis in public welfare would expose the tensions latent in this attenuated relationship between the ghetto vote and the urban party leadership, for it would thrust forward ghetto demands and back them with the threat of defections by voters who have so far remained both loyal and quiescent.

In the face of such a crisis, urban political leaders may well be paralyzed by a party apparatus which ties them to older constituent groups, even while the ranks of these groups are diminishing. The national Democratic leadership, however, is alert to the importance of the urban Negro vote, especially in national contests where the loyalty of other urban groups is weakening. Indeed, many of the legislative reforms of the Great Society can be understood as efforts, however feeble, to reinforce the allegiance of growing ghetto constituencies to the national Democratic Administration. In the thirties, Democrats began to put forward measures to circumvent the states in order to reach the big-city elements in the New Deal coalition; now it is becoming expedient to put forward measures to circumvent the weakened big-city mayors in order to reach the new minority poor.

Recent federal reforms have been impelled in part by widespread unrest in the ghetto, and instances of more aggressive Negro demands. But despite these signs that the ghetto vote may become less reliable in the future, there has been as yet no serious threat of massive defection. The national party has therefore not put much pressure on its urban branches to accommodate the minority poor. The resulting reforms have consequently been quite modest (e.g., the war against poverty, with its emphasis on the "involvement of the poor," is an effort to make the urban party apparatus somewhat more accommodating).

A welfare crisis would, of course, produce dramatic local political crisis, disrupting and exposing rifts among urban groups. Conservative Republicans are always ready to declaim the evils of public welfare, and they would probably be the first to raise a hue and cry. But deeper and politically more telling conflicts would take place within the Democratic coalition. Whites--both working-class ethnic groups and many in the middle class--would be aroused against the ghetto poor, while liberal groups, which until recently have been comforted by the notion that the poor are few and, in any event, receiving the beneficent assistance of public welfare, would probably support the movement. Group conflict, spelling political crisis for the local party apparatus, would thus become acute as welfare rolls mounted and the strains on local budgets became more severe. In New York City, where the Mayor is now facing desperate revenue shortages, welfare expenditures are already second only to those for public education.

It should also be noted that welfare costs are generally shared by local, state and federal governments, so that the crisis in the cities would intensify the struggle over revenues that is chronic in relations between cities and states. If the past is any predictor of the future, cities will fail to procure relief from this crisis by persuading states to increase their proportionate share of urban welfare costs, for state legislatures have been notoriously unsympathetic to the revenue needs of the city (especially where public welfare and minority groups are concerned).

If this strategy for crisis would intensify group cleavages, a federal income solution would not further exacerbate them. The demands put forward during recent civil rights drives in the Northern cities aroused the opposition of huge majorities. Indeed, such fierce resistance was evoked (e.g., school boycotts followed by counter-boycotts), that accessions by political leaders would have provoked greater political turmoil than the protests themselves, for profound class and ethnic interests are at stake in the employment, educational and residential institutions of our society. By contrast, legislative measures to provide direct income to the poor would permit national Democratic leaders to cultivate ghetto constituencies without unduly antagonizing other urban groups, as is the case when the battle lines are drawn over schools, housing or jobs. Furthermore, a federal income program would not only redeem local governments from the immediate crisis but would permanently relieve them of the financially and politically onerous burdens of public welfare--a function which generates support from none and hostility from many, not least of all welfare recipients. We suggest, in short, that if pervasive institutional reforms are not yet possible, requiring as they do expanded Negro political power and the development of new political alliances, crisis tactics can nevertheless be employed to secure particular reforms in the short run by exploiting weaknesses in current political alignments. Because the urban coalition stands weakened by group conflict today, disruption and threats of disaffection will count powerfully, provided that national leaders can respond with solutions which retain the support of ghetto constituencies while avoiding new group antagonisms and bolstering the urban party apparatus. These are the conditions, then, for an effective crisis strategy in the cities to secure an end to poverty.

No strategy, however confident its advocates may be, is foolproof. But if unforeseen contingencies thwart this plan to bring about new federal legislation in the field of poverty, it should also be noted that there would be gains even in defeat. For one thing, the plight of many poor people would be somewhat eased in the course of an assault upon public welfare. Existing recipients would come to know their rights and how to defend them, thus acquiring dignity where none now exists; and millions of dollars in withheld welfare benefits would become available to potential recipients now--not several generations from now. Such an attack should also be welcome to those currently concerned with programs designed to equip the young to rise out of poverty (e.g., Head Start), for surely children learn more readily when the oppressive burden of financial insecurity is lifted from the shoulders of their parents. And those seeking new ways to engage the Negro politically should remember that public resources have always been the fuel for low-income urban political organization. If organizers can deliver millions of dollars in cash benefits to the ghetto masses, it seems reasonable to expect that the masses will deliver their loyalties to their benefactors. At least, they have always done so in the past.

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