

The War on Poverty: 50 years later

Maureen Fiedler | Jan. 10, 2014 NCR Today

I've been in a lot of public demonstrations in my life, but my very first was in support of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. It was a large rally in downtown Pittsburgh, where I was teaching at the time.

And I actually remember the speech President Johnson gave announcing the War on Poverty in 1964. I cheered his words, and Congress at the time applauded loudly. But I have to wonder how our Congress today would react to those same words. A few cheers, perhaps, but many would be stone-cold silent.

Today, there is a battle over unemployment benefits and food stamps, and I am incredulous. People who have lost jobs need this help. (Yes, I know there's a deficit, but that could be cut by reducing the Pentagon budget, not the needs of poor people.)

So, I have to ask, where is the War on Poverty today? It's certainly not alive and well in Congress. Everyone seems to agree that we need more jobs, but when President Barack Obama proposes a program of nationwide infrastructure repair to create those jobs and to do needed repair to bridges and roads, Congress (largely the Republican leadership) refuses to act. In fact, most politicians rarely use the word "poverty."

They talk about income inequality or minimum wage or use other related issues. They are needed topics for political discussion, but they keep our consciousness away from "poverty," per se.

So it's a good time to remember 50 years, and the programs of the Great Society (Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, etc.) that live on. But so much more needs to be done.

And where do we hear that message today? In Vatican City. Pope Francis is commemorating our War on Poverty by waging his own.

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