

Lawrence J. McAndrews. *The Presidents and the Poor: America Battles Poverty, 1964-2017*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018. 368 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2673-1.

Reviewed by Marsha E. Barrett

Published on H-FedHist (August, 2019)

Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Despite the best of intentions--and worthiness of the goal--every president from Lyndon Johnson to Barack Obama has failed to eradicate poverty. In *The Presidents and the Poor*, Lawrence J. McAndrews seeks to explain this fifty-year history of bipartisan failure by focusing on each presidential administration's efforts to address poverty in America while battling obstacles inside and outside of the White House. Although Lyndon Johnson was the first to declare a war on poverty and his legacy looms large in this work, McAndrews begins with a brief assessment of John F. Kennedy's reluctant attempts to address the issue after witnessing pervasive poverty in West Virginia while on the campaign trail. The book's introduction emphasizes a theme that is prevalent throughout the text: each president picked up where his predecessor left off by balancing a personal interest in or experience with poverty, the political and economic restraints of the moment, and a willingness to expend political capital on what the author calls an "unrealistic objective." Despite the magnitude of the challenge, the author's assessment is clear: "None of them has demonstrated the resolve and fortitude required to surmount the enormous, political, and cultural barriers to eradicating poverty" (p. 2). According to McAndrews, some presidents were more successful at reducing poverty than others, namely

Johnson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton; however, their victories were short-lived.

McAndrews sets out to write the first comprehensive study of the antipoverty programs of the eight presidents who succeeded Johnson. This work will be useful for scholars and students in search of a synthetic work on the presidential politics of poverty-related initiatives and domestic spending more generally. Through his incorporation of the views of politicians and commentators from both the Left and Right, it is possible to see the evolution of the rhetoric employed by both sides of the political spectrum when referring to the poor and causes of poverty. The work also makes use of primary sources drawn from presidential archives to trace the internal dialogue and disagreements that played out amidst various generations of presidential advisers who sought to employ divergent strategies to upend the status quo. One figure from this community who plays a significant and reoccurring role in this work is Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Not only is it possible to see the influence of Moynihan's views on the "pathology" of the black family on the poverty policy of Johnson and Nixon, but also how his rise within the Democratic ranks of the US Senate made him an influential adversary and ally for Democratic and Republican administrations. While the perspectives of the poor and activists

who work on their behalf do appear on occasion, this is a work that focuses on top-down efforts to eradicate poverty. This approach is in line with McAndrews's position that the vast majority of Americans and the press are unconcerned by the troubles of the poor and no one is better suited to address this apathy than a president. "If the president truly leads an all-out assault on poverty," writes McAndrews, "Congress and the public should follow, until a major event (foreign or domestic) or the next midterm election justifies a substantial course correction" (p. 261).

McAndrews writes that while progressive scholars largely rejected Moynihan's focus on the single female-headed household as a central cause of poverty in the black community during the 1960s, by the late 1990s scholars had reached a consensus that attributed black poverty to "systemic racism" and a "culture of poverty" (p. 255). While this remains a controversial issue for many scholars, they would agree with McAndrews's conclusion that the presidents he examines have forwarded such ideas through an emphasis on culture. As McAndrews explains, "though some on the left still denied the existence of a culture, and some on the right still downplayed the persistence of racism, all the presidents from Johnson to Obama to varying degrees acknowledged a culture of poverty as a consequence of systemic racism" (p. 255). This focus on culture and family has indeed remained a popular perspective held by the occupants of the White House. African American supporters of President Obama, for example, were especially concerned by the forty-fourth president's seemingly condescending admonishments of young black men, in particular, in the name of encouraging them to pull up their proverbial bootstraps. While the author does highlight the influence of figures like Moynihan, his chapters on poverty initiatives in the Johnson and Nixon administrations do not provide historical context for the racialization of welfare recipients that dates back to the 1950s, commonly held ideas about welfare leading to dependence, or the widespread

perception that to be poor was to be un-American. By not addressing this larger milieu that shaped the thinking of presidents, their advisers, and liberal and conservative scholars and bureaucrats interested in poverty, it can appear that presidents and their inner circles are working within a vacuum. Without this additional context, it may be difficult to understand why work requirements were thought to be a necessary component of welfare and welfare reform in the 1960s and beyond. Although this is not the central purpose of this work, by exploring and historicizing popular conceptions about the poor--the black poor in particular--and the causes of poverty, it would be clearer, especially to students and general audiences, why Johnson would utter comments such as, "I'm going to teach these Nigras that don't know anything how to work for themselves, instead of just breeding" (p. 12). They will also understand the uphill battle welfare rights activists faced when they argued that childrearing was labor that deserved compensation, not work requirements.

The Presidents and the Poor illuminates the long-standing consensus about the poor that has emanated from the White House. McAndrews assesses presidents' records on poverty according to their ability to challenge the status quo and what has been referred to as the "poverty-industrial-complex." *The Presidents and the Poor* is an accessible chronicle of the permutations of presidential administrations' efforts to end poverty since 1961. It captures the complicated nature of the issue and the partisan obstacles that have frustrated every president since Johnson. Readers will find the author's treatment of this topic thought-provoking and helpful for deconstructing contemporary fights over poverty policy in Washington.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

Citation: Marsha E. Barrett. Review of McAndrews, Lawrence J. *The Presidents and the Poor: America Battles Poverty, 1964-2017*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. August, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53660>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.