

States of the Union

PENNIES FOR THE PRESIDENT

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



IT WAS ALMOST noon, but the clock in the empty OEO corridor read one minute before five, an appropriate time for an agency verging on extinction. I was paying what would probably be my last call to the Office of Economic Opportunity, that peculiar, Camelot-like creation of the Kennedy-Johnson era, now sinking fast into the Nixon sunset.

Eight years had passed since my first visit, when I'd gone in answer to an early-morning hurry-up summons from Washington: "Shriver here . . . important meeting . . . Indians . . . housing . . ." I'd scram-

bled out of bed and scampered down to Washington, a willing draftee in the new War On Poverty. Sargent Shriver had publicly promised we would win by 1970 and I hoped to be in the great victory parade, to march through a new America expunged of shacks and tenements.

The strategy was to cure the poor: Head Start for the little ones, burdened beyond their years by something labeled "cultural deprivation"; job training for their older brothers who were, presumably, eager to become grease-monkeys; and for everybody else out there in Poverty Land, an immediate infusion of political power, otherwise known as Maximum Feasible Participation. The vehicle for MFP would be CAPs, a network of local Community Action Programs controlled and operated by the poor themselves. Agonies were to be dispelled by acronyms.

Everything at OEO was rush-rush in those days; the staff careened from one emergency to the next. The climate reminded me of an old joke: A gentle lad beats up a Jewish lad. "You killed Christ, you killed Christ," he shouts as he

pummels. "But that happened 2,000 years ago," protests the Jew. "Yeah," says the other, "but I just found out." We had just found out about poverty; there was no time to lose.

That first session I attended turned out to be a fair sample of OEO procedure. Shriver wasn't there—he'd been called suddenly to another crucial gathering in Rochester—but some of his assistants were more or less present, hurrying into the conference room, puffing urbanely for a few moments on their Dr. Grabows, then charging out again in response to frantic gesticulations from secretaries at the door. More grants to approve, more crises to confront.

Most of those cold-eyed functionaries were left over from the New Frontier. Within a year they would be gone, having returned to their universities and consultancies to await the next Kennedy and the next crusade. For the time being, however, they were calling the shots, and the topic that day was Indians.

I found I was part of a consulting team, along with a sanitary engineer on loan from the Fed-

eral Housing Administration and an architect from the Battelle Memorial Institute, a gigantic industrial research firm with headquarters in Columbus, Ohio. Our assignment was to investigate "the plight of the Indians," and we were indefatigable, riding fearlessly through the canyons and across the prairies in our Avis hardtop. We tried harder.

In Arizona we crept into tiny, unlit hogans, there to inquire of astonished Navahos whether they would prefer appliances run by gas or by electricity. In North Dakota I asked an old, toothless Chippewa woman for permission to enter her dirt-floor hut. She smiled—our's was not the first delegation from Washington to come bearing promises. "You're going to fool me again, aren't you?" she said.

Months later we made our report, noting that 90 per cent of the nation's Indian population was living in shacks, tents and used car bodies. The Battelle people, who knew more about the grantsman game than I did, declared that the solution was to build two "prototype" houses on Battelle's grounds in Columbus, in the presence of a few Indian "trainees" from Rosebud, South Dakota.

It was done. And that might have been the entire upshot of OEO's emergency housing program for Indians—two unoccupied structures in the middle of Columbus, Ohio, less than a mile from James Thurber's old residence. But I was naïve. For some reason I genuinely thought OEO had intended to build houses. So I told the whole story to a friend who worked for UPI, and he put it on the wire: "A \$200,000 house for Indians, which the Indians will never see, has been constructed in . . ." The next morning I got a call from my OEO contact. "It looks like we're going to have to move on that Rosebud thing," he said. "Some son of a bitch leaked the story."

We built 375 homes in Rosebud.

It was OEO's sole venture into Indian housing. Goodbye, Columbus.

Now, a thousand years later, the time was officially 4:59 in the War On Poverty. President Nixon had decreed that the idea was a foolish waste of money, a fiscal fiasco, and he had appointed one Howard Phillips, a Goldwater ideologue without Goldwater's saving kindness, to dismantle Camelot.

Phillips is a brilliantly cruel choice. As a White House aide he steadfastly hounded many of OEO's legal assistance operations out of existence. As OEO's last administrator he has promised to finish the job, observing in an interview with the *Washington Post* that most of the programs were, in any case, "Marxist-oriented."

I did not see Phillips at the OEO office, only a couple of minor civil servants who expected to be fired momentarily. One of them had a sign on his door: "Beware—Endangered Species." The warning could have referred to his clients—he was in a division that served migrant farmworkers—though it probably referred to himself. He was still at his desk, processing fresh proposals, writing memos about new grant requests. But it was all reflex, a weak twitch remembered from days when the muscles were toned and the mind was eager.

"Do you know something funny?" he remarked. "There's nobody left around here with authority to O.K. these grants."

IT IS A measure of our social impotence, if not of our depravity, that we can actually mourn the passing of a colorful cardboard bomber that once dropped puffballs on poverty. Yet mourn we must, because OEO, for all its hypocrisy, was the one tangible sign that anybody inhabiting the Federal isolation booth gave a damn about the poor. And some of the money did trickle down to those Americans who needed it most; some of it did teach children to read and parents

to hope. True, OEO was, much of the time, a shoddy string of promises casually made and casually broken, but it contained within itself an older and deeper vision that Americans have never quite abandoned—a commitment of honest concern for the welfare of every citizen.

That pledge now seems in greater peril than ever before. The Nixon budget stands Robin Hood on his head—taking from the poor and giving to the rich. The Pentagon is going to spend \$79 billion and the big industries will continue to enjoy subsidies; yet all the needy will receive is a lecture on hard work and initiative, while the elderly will have their Medicare expenses doubled.

Well, somebody has to pay for the military hardware, the corporation tax loopholes and the special-interest handouts. And the President has cheerfully sent the bill to those Americans who can afford it least—the rural and urban poor, the aged, the ill-housed, the unemployed, the small farmers, and the low-wage workers.

The list of unaffluent Americans whom our Chief of State is savagely dunning is very long; it may even represent a majority of citizens. That is why some of them have organized a Pennies-for-the-President campaign, and have asked Aaron Henry, the head of the NAACP in Mississippi, to be their national chairman. The idea is simple: Every American on the White House's victim-list will be urged to send a penny to Mr. Nixon, care of a Senator or Representative. Imagine millions of pennies pouring into the Congress. Imagine Congressmen delivering these pennies each day to the President.

If you want to support this campaign or to learn more about it, write to: Pennies for the President, 636 Page St., Clarksdale, Miss. It can't hurt, it might help, and it's certainly more useful than building another house in Columbus.