

No more war (on poverty, that is)

Author: Margolis, Richard J

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Abstract: Indians . . . housing. . . . " I bounded out of bed and caught the first plane to Washington, only to find that Mr. Shriver had gone somewhere else But his assistants were more or less present, hurrying into the conference room, then charging out again in response to frantic gesticulations from secretaries in the doorway. More crises to confront I found I was part of a consulting team, along with a sanitary engineer on loan from the Federal Housing Administration and an architect from the Battelle Memorial Institute, a big industrial research firm with headquarters in Columbus, Ohio.

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Full Text: I'm sorry I missed the recent Washington farewell to the Community Services Administration. The CSA, you may recall, was created in 1973 to take the place of the Office of Economic Opportunity. The OEO, you may recall, was created in 1965 to wage war on poverty Now both are gone, victims of Reaganomics and Nixonomics, respectively. For Republicans this has begun to look like an octennial habit, shutting down the only poor people's agency extant in Washington. What will they dismantle in 1989? The United Way A friend who attended the CSA goodbye party called to tell me about it. "Sargent Shriver was there," she said. "He looked absolutely marvelous, as usual, and he made a terrible speech. I can't recall the details but they were hopeful. One thing he said was about looking forward to a time when no one would be poor or hungry.' Pessimism was never a Shriver long suit. When he became the OEO's first director, he pledged to wipe out poverty in America by 1980, possibly sooner. Even in those times - when large visions were deemed more useful than specific plans - Mr. Shriver's hopes struck many as excessive For all its energy and ingenuity, the war on poverty never really got organized. If its OEO phase was oddly frenetic - a response to two decades of neglecting the poor - its CSA period was strangely lethargic. The CSA became a perfect metaphor for the laid-back seventies: the little agency that couldn't My own brush with the war on poverty, as an occasional housing consultant, took place during the frenetic phase. An early morning phone call summoned me: "Shriver here . . . important meeting . . . Indians . . . housing. . . . " I bounded out of bed and caught the first plane to Washington, only to find that Mr. Shriver had gone somewhere else But his assistants were more or less present, hurrying into the conference room, then charging out again in response to frantic gesticulations from secretaries in the doorway. More grants to approve! More crises to confront I found I was part of a consulting team, along with a sanitary engineer on loan from the Federal Housing Administration and an architect from the Battelle Memorial Institute, a big industrial research firm with headquarters in Columbus, Ohio. Our assignment was to investigate "the plight of the Indians." We were indefatigable, riding fearlessly through canyons and across prairies in our Avis hardtop. We tried harder In Arizona we crept into tiny, unlit hogans and inquired of astonished Navaho women whether they preferred appliances run by gas or electricity. In North Dakota I asked an old, toothless Chippewa woman for permission to enter her dirt-floor hut. She smiled. "You're going to fool me again, aren't you?' Ours was not the first delegation from Washington to have come bearing promises Months later we made our report, noting that 90 percent of the nation's Indian population were living in shacks, tents, and car bodies. The Battelle people, who knew more about grantsmanship than I did, declared that the solution was to build two "prototype" houses on Battelle's grounds in Columbus, using the labor of a few Indian "trainees" from the Rosebud Sioux reservation in South Dakota It was done. And that might have been the end of OEO's emergency housing program for Indians - two unoccupied structures in the middle of Columbus, Ohio. But I told the story to a friend who worked for the United Press, 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, explaining that some fool had leaked the story We built 375 homes in Rosebud. It was OEO's sole venture into Indian housing. Goodbye, Columbus I don't mean to be overly cynical about the OEO. If it frequently fooled the poor, it just as frequently delivered them from evils. Even Richard Nixon, while cheerfully liquidating the agency, was careful to preserve its most imaginative programs, like Head Start, VISTA, and Community Action. These he distributed to other federal agencies, thereby creating a kind of antipoverty bureaucratic diaspora. It exists to this day Atop OEO's ashes, meanwhile, a timorous Congress planted the CSA, an underfed phoenix whose chief assignment turned out to be helping poor people weatherize their shacks. It was like sending in Marv Throneberry to pinch hit for Mickey Mantle Still, rather than mock the CSA's feeble tenure, we should all mourn its passing. For the agency was more than it seemed: it constituted a saving remnant in Babylon, the embodiment of the nation's most altruistic impulses and also the last, best hope of 25 million poverty-stricken Americans. The CSA may have accomplished little, but it symbolized much Now Mr. Reagan tells us that the poor no longer need a war on poverty. Instead they are to rely for succor and sustenance on something called the free market. The rest of us can stop worrying. Where Great Society crusades failed, supply-side mechanisms will succeed Credit: By Richard J. Margolis; Richard J. Margolis, a writer on social issues, lives in Georgetown, Conn.

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