

Sometimes, Something Seems to Work: NO CEASEFIRES The War on Poverty ...

By Richard J. Margolis

New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 3, 1985;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)

pg. BR14

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NO CEASEFIRES

The War on Poverty in Roanoke Valley.

By Edwin L. Cobb.

176 pp. Cabin John, Md.

Seven Locks Press. \$13.95.

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AFTER Richard M. Nixon beheaded our War on Poverty more than a decade ago, parts of the torso miraculously continued to function. In "No CeaseFires," Edwin L. Cobb, an old-fashioned activist and the executive director of the National Demonstration Water Project in Washington, presents us with a portrait of Total Action Against Poverty, or TAP for short. Fighting the good fight in five southern Virginia counties, TAP is one of some 800 community-action programs still alive and kicking.

To read this upbeat tale is to come upon an oddly intact throwback to the Great Society hidden just off the neoconservative thoroughway. All the dear old adornments are in their appointed places — a pervasive air of

Richard J. Margolis is writing a book about the elderly poor in America.

optimism, a concern for people down on their luck, a focus on opportunity and self-help. But the traveler's elation at discovering this saving remnant soon gives way to sadness for its many cousins long departed.

Since TAP's emergence 18 years ago, the region's poverty rate has dropped from about 20 percent to 11 percent. In contrast, Mr. Cobb reminds us, the national poverty rate recently jumped to 15 percent, accounting for 35 million poor people. "This is the largest number of poor people we have ever had in American history," he notes.

If Mr. Cobb's ballpark figures do not quite add up to a liberal triumph — *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* — they appropriately rebut the other side's equally shaky statistics.

Chaotic as it may have been, the War on Poverty did invent an alternative to social indifference. TAP "has always been a guerrilla army flailing at the enemy whenever found," Mr. Cobb writes. It has attempted "everything imaginable to take action against poverty." He emphasizes imagination as a trusty guerrilla weapon, but what comes through here is TAP's persistent kindness. "You are all angels in disguise," a TAP board member assured the staff recently — self-congratulatory, perhaps, but in the Great Society, the presence of angels was deemed commonplace.

There appears to be nothing slick or magical behind

TAP's success. Its roster of projects reads like the Whole Antipoverty Catalogue — legal aid, food distribution, housing rehabilitation, on-the-job training, adult education, grass-roots organizing, counseling for drug addicts, shelters for battered wives and programs assisting former offenders — to name a few items from TAP's cornucopia. A "total action" program cannot be expected to settle for parsimony.

"Think globally and act locally," counsels Cabell Brand, the Virginia gentleman — a descendant, "albeit illegitimate," of Thomas Jefferson — who has chaired TAP's board of directors since its inception and who has written a foreword to "No CeaseFires." He might have admonished his fellow liberals to *feel* locally, too. TAP's story could lend encouragement to the many nowadays who seem embarrassed by their most beneficent impulses in a nest-feathering society.

The Reagan Administration is urging Congress to eliminate all Federal assistance to TAP and other community-action programs. Mr. Cobb urges just the opposite. He wants us to issue "a declaration of interdependence" that would amount to the virtual institutionalization of human compassion. "Poverty is really a national problem," he insists. "If American prosperity is not to be washed away in another tide of poverty, true liberalism must reassert itself." □