

States of the Union

POWER AND THE POOR

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

I WANT to tell you about Paul Wellstone's remarkable narrative, *How the Rural Poor Got Power* (University of Massachusetts Press, 227 pp., \$12.50). It is the story of an Alinsky-style group of white poor people in southern Minnesota, who for a few brief moments managed to get their hands on the right bureaucratic levers—levers that governed the flow of food stamps and welfare payments. Its message is that the brave hopes we poverty warriors kindled in the hearts of poor people during the '60s continue to glow in the '70s. Wellstone, a young, ebullient political scientist at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, has found some red-hot embers beneath the ashes of the Great Society.

But give me a moment first to sift those ashes. Dead and grimy as they are, they once were flaming dreams. We won't understand the achievement of the Organization for a Better Rice County (OBRC)—that fragile institution to which Wellstone has played both Moses and Boswell—without facing up to the failure of John F. Kennedy's War Against Poverty, continued by Lyndon B. Johnson.

The "one good thing about being poor," an elderly OBRC member tells Wellstone, is that "you can't be sued—so you might as well speak up." At the outset of the War Against Poverty, helping poor people to speak up was close to the heart of the matter. The idea was less to redistribute wealth than to redistribute power. That is why the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) kept doling out a shiny new commodity called Maximum Feasible Participation (MFP), Federal jargon for allowing the poor a voice in political decisions affecting their welfare. It is easy to mock MFP in retrospect, as Daniel P. Moynihan did a few years ago—coolly and, I think cruelly—in *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*; but to poor people in the mid-'60s initials like MFP and OEO carried their own talismanic magic: They were open sesame to the good life.

What the early War Against Poverty did—with yeoman help from Saul Alinsky, Cesar Chavez, Myles Horton, and Martin Luther King Jr.—was give poor people the courage and wherewithal to challenge smugly repressive local establishments: Head-

start parents had a chance to assess, and berate, local educators; welfare mothers learned how to bone up on the law and then to demand their rights; community action leaders found the strength to press city and state officials for a broad array of previously withheld services, from health care to housing.

It was clearly an uncomfortable moment for those sitting in local saddles; but when finally they pulled themselves together and struck back, the response of the Great Society was to cave in instantly. Congress passed hasty amendments giving mayors and governors veto power over certain high-flying, MFP-winged antipoverty projects, including OEO's crucial legal assistance program; and the word came down from the White House that the party was over: Henceforth the War Against Poverty would genuflect to power while giving only a reflexive nod to MFP.

It was at this disappointing juncture (1966) that the late Walter Reuther, ever the optimist, pried loose \$1 million from the United Auto Workers treasury and used it to indulge an old ambition—the piecing together of a national coalition consisting of well-intentioned liberals and ill-used poor people. Reuther and his deputies, most of them recent refugees from the OEO, named their invention the Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP), and after a year of desultory tuning up they got around to calling a national conference. It took place in Washington at the International Inn, a hotel with a plastic-domed swimming pool shadowing the circular driveway out front.

I attended that conference, along with dozens of other reporters, hundreds of bureaucrats and thousands of poor people. The poor came fully prepared to participate in a maximally feasible manner. By the time they got done with us, Reuther's dream lay in rubble and few of the middle-class reformers present would ever again sentimentalize their notions of the poor.

It happened at the ballroom luncheon, where Sargent Shriver, still the

War Against Poverty's dapper general, was scheduled to deliver what the conference leadership was pleased to call "a major address." I knew early on that something was not quite right when the woman sitting next to me—a black sharecropper from Alabama—audibly corrected the minister mid-way through his invocation.

"Lord," he pleaded, "look kindly upon your suffering children in the fields, who are forced to chop cotton for only 60 cents an hour."

"Thirty cents, Lord," my table-mate stage-whispered. She just wanted to set the record straight.

Then, while we were spooning our individual fruit compotes, Shriver mounted the podium, flashed his gleaming white cuffs and began to speak. The great war was going splendidly, he assured us; by 1970—or 1975 at the very latest—all poverty in America would be banished.

People in the back of the room began to laugh. Someone shouted, "What about the grant you just cancelled in Buffalo?" Someone else cried, "Hey, Sarge, how come you killed CDGM?"—an all-black Head Start program in Mississippi. It wasn't long before everyone was shouting at once. Poor Shriver; tight-lipped and red-faced, he departed with his retinue.

But the pandemonium continued; there was much milling and yelling. I milled, too, taking notes as I wandered. In the center of the ballroom I spotted an acquaintance, Olivia, a black woman from Rochester, New York. She was standing in her stocking feet atop a table loaded with goblets and dishes. Smiling, she surveyed the madding crowd.

"Olivia," I said, "explain this to me. What's happening here?"

"It's very simple," she answered. "The folk got loose."

In Rice County, Minnesota, a few years ago the folk again got loose. Their visible enemies, as always, were the people; the county welfare office, the local community action program, the public housing authority. These turned out to be the agencies entrusted

by a relatively affluent citizenry to keep the poor in their place—that is, out of sight.

As Wellstone tells it, there was "a core of poor people . . . who were disillusioned with the OEO program. Some came to meeting after meeting to speak out, though the [OEO] forum guaranteed failure. Some stopped coming to meetings altogether. Some were aides in various service programs, paid less than poverty wages by the antipoverty agency. Some were welfare mothers seeking relief from harassment by the county welfare department. Some were just looking for encouragement and support to survive a cruel and disappointing life. . . ."

WITH a small grant from the national United Church of Christ, Wellstone and four others (a welfare mother, a Headstart mother and two college students) started blowing on embers. "The strategy was to build an organization around conflict issues," and to choose fights that the fledgling group stood a fair chance of winning. Their first real opportunity came in late 1972, when the county commissioners had to decide whether to continue the commodities food program they were administering or switch to food stamps. OBRC used the occasion to publicly scold the commission for the way it was running its commodities program: The food was inadequate and there was only one distribution center for the entire county.

Unaccustomed to criticism from the poor, the commissioners muttered and demurred, but ultimately gave in to all demands; they even promised to install chairs for the elderly in distribution centers. (The waiting time for food was sometimes six hours.) "This was an enormous victory," notes Wellstone. "Poor people . . . had forced the county welfare board into positive reform of the food commodity program. . . . Nothing builds confidence like success."

There would be several more successes, and with each triumph the organization would attract new mem-

bers. Yet, as Wellstone points out, success was also the organization's Achilles heel. It had to keep winning in order to keep growing—an impossible treadmill. Not even the Chamber of Commerce could be expected to win all its battles, much less a scraggly, underfinanced coalition of poor people and local do-gooders.

Worse, as the conflict escalated, the Establishment grew more skillful at suppression. The local newspaper, having initially made a tactical error by airing all OBRC grievances, soon imposed what amounted to a news blackout. The welfare board, meanwhile, launched a series of midnight raids on welfare clients with OBRC connections. People began to let their memberships lapse; they feared retaliation.

The organization fought back as best it could. Members staged a "five o'clock raid" on the welfare office, unleashing their children on the astonished bureaucrats. The tots ran amok, squealing delightedly and smearing jam on desks and walls (jam *today* for a change); the welfare director promised to call off his midnight raids.

The OBRC is no more. Somewhere along the way it lost its momentum and mystique—its ability both to enlist the poor and to frighten the affluent. Like so many of its predecessors in the '60s, OBRC was never a solid institution; it was a collection of poor rural citizens who for a brief moment in the '70s summoned the courage and optimism to challenge their "betters." They were never really defeated; they were outwitted by a system in possession of all the weaponry: the press, the law, the bureaucracy. Invariably, the enemies of the poor have world enough and time.

But let Patti Fritz, an OBRC member whom Wellstone calls "the resident cynic," have the final word: "This shit about putting the power back in the hands of the people—that is ridiculous because they do have it. They have always had it. They have to be told they have it, to see it and use it. . . . The thing is to get the fear out of little people. . . ."