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The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980

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Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty has long been portrayed as the most potent symbol of all that is wrong with big government. Conservatives deride the War on Poverty for corruption and the creation of “poverty pimps,” and even liberals carefully distance themselves from it. Examining the long War on Poverty from the 1960s onward, this book makes a controversial argument that the programs were in many ways a success, reducing poverty rates and weaving a social safety net that has proven as enduring as programs that came out of the New Deal.

The War on Poverty also transformed American politics from the grass roots up, mobilizing poor people across the nation. Blacks in crumbling cities, rural whites in Appalachia, Cherokees in Oklahoma, Puerto Ricans in the Bronx, migrant Mexican farmworkers, and Chinese immigrants from New York to California built social programs based on Johnson’s vision of a greater, more just society. Contributors to this volume chronicle these vibrant and largely unknown histories while not shying away from the flaws and failings of the movement?including inadequate funding, co-optation by local political elites, and blindness to the reality that mothers and their children made up most of the poor.

In the twenty-first century, when one in seven Americans receives food stamps and community health centers are the largest primary care system in the nation, the War on Poverty is as relevant as ever. This book helps us to understand the turbulent era out of which it emerged and why it remains so controversial to this day.

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