The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War
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CHAPTER EIGHT

The War on Poverty

Any realistic effort to deal with the problems of rural poverty and rural housing would require large appropriations over a long period of years.

Henry Wallace to Eleanor Roosevelt, 1939

The federal government don’t care about poor folks. Well, we got to find out what it does care about and then we got to raise a lot of hell and disturb them in this thing they care about.

Unidentified Mississippi black woman, 1966

THE POOR SHALL NEVER CEASE OUT OF THE LAND

If a person who knew the plantation South in the Great Depression of the 1930s had left and returned three decades later, he or she would have found profound changes with the exception of the deprivation. Several million blacks and whites remained in the depths of poverty. The few federal programs introduced to alleviate the suffering of the destitute had hardly made an impression. In 1964, as in 1934, across the plantation regions people were still ill fed, ill housed, and ill clothed. Because of the demise and the mechanization of plantation agriculture, many were actually in worse relative circumstances. Housing was still the most profound landscape expression of the poverty (fig. 8.1). Although plantation housing of the mid-1960s appeared little changed since the depression, there were a few subtle improvements. The Rural Electrification Administration created by the New Deal had helped to bring electric power to all but the remotest dwellings. Naked light bulbs now hung from the ceilings at the ends of electric cords, exposing the dingy, greasy newspaper- and magazine-covered walls of tenant shacks. In some small crowded kitchens, an electric refrigerator stood across from a wood-burning stove. Electric pumps on wells had brought water to the shacks on many plantations. Hydrants in
yards had replaced wells and cisterns, but in the early 1960s, a cold water faucet over a rust-stained kitchen sink was a luxury. The affluent poor owned washing machines that often sat proudly on the front porches, placed there as status symbols as well as for the lack of other storage space. Dilapidated automobiles and pickups were parked in front of some shacks. To reduce maintenance costs more than to keep the wind from whistling through cracks between wall planks, some planters had covered their tenant houses with cheap tar paper that resembled brown and red brick veneer.

The civil rights workers who ventured into the plantation regions during the 1960s, whether they were black or white, Northern or Southern, were primarily from the urban world. Most had no experiences that prepared them for what they found in the rural South.¹ The urbanites encountered a destitute world that they not only had never seen but did not even know existed in the United States. The naivety of young civil rights workers, especially affluent Northern whites, resulted in letters to parents and friends filled with graphic descriptions. One student’s deflowering encounter with a black family on a Mississippi plantation during 1964 Freedom Summer is hauntingly reminiscent of Raper and Reid’s description of Seab and Kate Johnson a quarter of a century earlier. “Upon approaching the house, we were invited on the porch which was strewn with bean shellings, rotten cotton sacks, pieces of a broken stove, and other assorted bits of scrap. . . . On a drooping cot to our right as we came in the door lay a small child (six months old). The child’s eyes, nose, and mouth were covered with flies. Not being able to stand such a sight, I tried to chase them away only to be met with the reply of the mother. . . . ‘They will only come back again.’”²

The depravity among blacks across the plantation regions in the 1960s was merely the continuance of the poverty that had plagued them since emancipation. Although a few blacks became landowners and small-town businessmen, accumulated wealth, and climbed from the abyss of the plantation, most remained destitute tenant farmers or day laborers, who were severed from the agricultural system as it declined or was transformed. The rates of poverty among blacks were staggering across the plantation regions. In the Yazoo Delta an astounding 56 percent of the blacks were poor.³ The distress of rural blacks would have been even greater if several modest federal programs to assist the poor had not been initiated during the depression and expanded after the Second World War. Two national social aid programs introduced by the New Deal and modified under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations gradually provided modest
FIG. 8.1. Dwellings of black households, Coahoma and Tunica Counties, Mississippi, 1987. Electricity, refrigerators, freezers, washing machines, televisions, propane gas for heating and cooking, and motor vehicles helped to revolutionize life after the Second World War, but for many blacks basic housing remained similar to that of the second generation of post–Civil War dwellings. Charles S. Aiken
amounts of assistance to more and more blacks in the plantation regions. In addition to old age and survivors and unemployment insurance programs, the Social Security Act of 1935 also created grant programs for the aged, the blind, and families with dependent children. The grant programs differed from the social insurance programs in that they required cooperative federal-state funding. By 1940, all states had enacted legislation to participate in the grant programs.  

Food assistance was another social aid program begun under the New Deal. In 1935 Congress passed the Potato Control Act, which included a provision that authorized the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of the Department of Agriculture to purchase surplus farm products for distribution to needy families. The primary purpose of the program was to reduce agricultural surpluses rather than to assist the poor. Criticism of the surplus commodities program by grocers and even by food recipients resulted in the introduction of a food stamps program that operated from 1939 until 1943. The food stamps program served only about 4 million persons nationally. The surplus commodity program declined with the introduction of food stamps and was limited during the years immediately following the Second World War by the export of surplus food to feed the hungry in war-torn countries. During the 1950s, renewed emphasis was placed on the domestic surplus commodity program, and the number of recipients increased from 248,000 in 1950 to more than 7 million in 1963. The surplus commodity program helped poor families to subsist but hardly provided an affluent diet. Cornmeal, grits, rice, flour, peanut butter, nonfat dry milk, and butter were major staples. Other foods, including cheese and canned meat, part of which was purchased by the Department of Agriculture, enhanced the diet. A poor family received generic brown bags and cans of food with the exact amount based on the size of household. Because the program was meant to supplement food that was grown and purchased, families could not live sufficiently on just surplus commodities. In 1964, Congress passed a new food stamp act administered by the Department of Agriculture. The surplus commodity program was continued, but counties could not participate in both.

Throughout the South in general and in the plantation regions in particular, the federal assistance programs administered by state and local officials discriminated against blacks. Shortly after emergency relief measures were initiated by the New Deal, an investigation of the programs in Dallas County, Alabama, found: “Negroes predominate on the relief rolls. Nevertheless the discrimination against them is so sharp in the matter of money allotted that this gives an inaccurate picture of cost distribution. . . .
The average amount of relief given to the colored households for the month of June was $5.07 while for the white households the amount was $15.20. These allotments are based on budgetary needs and the Negro is assumed not to have as high needs as the white worker.  

Discrimination against blacks continued under New Deal assistance programs. Myrdal found the discrimination in Aid to Dependent Children was pronounced in seven of the Southern states where “the proportion of Negroes among those accepted for aid to dependent children was smaller even than the proportion of Negroes among all children under 16 years of age.” He concluded that in “the urban South” blacks received “a larger share of the total relief benefits than correspond[ed] to” their “population ratio.” They were “worse off in the rural South, where the most apparent racial discrimination [was] shown, at the same time as the general relief standards [were] very low.” When federal legislation to aid the poor was introduced, powerful Southern congressmen and senators saw to it that programs with the potential to assist blacks were greatly diluted and that there was significant state and local control. The 1935 Social Security Act did not include agricultural and domestic workers in the old age and survivors and unemployment insurance programs. The Social Security grant and Department of Agriculture surplus food programs were administered through state and local agencies. In the plantation regions, federal assistance programs for the poor were co-opted and corrupted by planters. The programs became an extension of paternalism; planters largely determined to whom aid would be given and from whom it would be withheld.

As plantation agriculture was mechanized and black tenant farmers were eliminated, federal programs to aid the poor were manipulated to help maintain the supply of cheap day laborers. The programs allowed blacks to subsist when there was no work in the fields, but aid was withdrawn in late spring when cotton choppers were required to weed fields and was not resumed until the cotton harvest was almost finished late in the fall. In 1943, Louisiana introduced a requirement that Aid to Dependent Children be withheld from families in which the youngest child was seven years old if the mother was capable of working in the fields. An “employable mother” rule was adopted in Georgia in 1952 for families in which the youngest child was over three years of age. Under Georgia rules, a mother could not refuse any type of suitable employment, even if the wage was below what could be received from the Aid to Dependent Children program. A Yazoo Delta day laborer with seven children asked a SNCC worker, “What can a person do for his children when there’s not enough food to eat?” To force her and her children into the fields, the administrator of the
Bolivar County USDA surplus food program did not issue rations to the family between April 1 and November 1. In 1961, 24 percent of black mothers in the South who received Aid to Dependent Children worked at least part time, compared with 8 percent in the remainder of the nation. In the plantation regions, the median monthly ADC payment was $11.70 for blacks and $21.90 for whites.9

Among the techniques used to manipulate blacks and poor whites were the speed with which applications for welfare were handled and the ways in which annual incomes of applicants were computed. Because most blacks worked irregularly and usually kept no records, they had no proof as to whether or not they qualified. Lack of proof left the decision to the discretion of county administrators. In Humphreys County, Mississippi, one family was denied participation in the surplus food program because “they had fixed up their house.” Another family was removed from the program at the insistence of a planter who had “blacklisted” the father.10 A frequently told story of the civil rights movement was the attempt by the white power structure of Leflore County, Mississippi, to use the federal surplus food program as a weapon to halt the voter registration efforts of SNCC. The county board of supervisors voted in October 1962 to cease participation in the program, which supplied food to several thousand blacks. SNCC retaliated with a large food and clothing drive among its affiliates. Despite the interception of the first shipment by Coahoma County law officers, SNCC workers eventually managed to deliver food and clothing to poor blacks in Leflore County.11

In part, the administration of programs to assist the poor in the Southern plantation regions was supported by how “welfare” was conceived and viewed at the national level. Aid to Families with Dependent Children was created by elitist Northern urban social workers who misperceived those whom they sought to help. The program was designed to assist a largely mythical and rapidly vanishing ideal family. The social workers failed to grasp that divorced and deserted women with children, especially blacks and members of other minority groups, increasingly headed families that needed welfare. Aid to Dependent Children, however, was devised to assist widows and orphans and low-income families with husbands who were temporarily unemployed. If single women with children were assisted to a too great extent, men’s commitment to their families would be discouraged. By the 1950s, at the national level, sympathy for the poor who were not members of nuclear families, especially for blacks and other minorities, had almost disappeared. Aid to Families with Dependent Children, surplus food distribution, and other welfare programs were comprehended as en-
couraging immoral behavior by subsidizing wayward women to have illegitimate children. Manipulation of welfare programs in the South to force women and even children into the fields did not violate the national conscience, much less the local ones. Consensus among affluent whites, and even among lower-income ones, in the plantation regions was that the welfare programs wasted money on undeserving immoral black women and their illegitimate children. An oft repeated story was that a young unmarried black woman supposedly told an older married white woman, “Every time I gits another one, I gits more money.”

**THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ACT**

The 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were not the only major legislation passed during the Johnson administration which had a profound impact on the plantation regions. Poverty, which had largely gone unnoticed during the 1940s and 1950s, suddenly reemerged in the 1960s as a critical national issue. From the end of the depression into the early 1960s, American poverty seemed to be on the wane and was largely forgotten. John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, presented the idea that the poverty that had been so widespread across the United States in the 1930s had largely been annihilated during the Second World War and the booming postwar era. Galbraith’s book, however, was followed by studies that depicted a darker and bleaker picture. Robert Lampman, in a study commissioned by Illinois senator Paul Douglas, who questioned Galbraith’s sanguine view, found that by the late 1950s the movement of persons out of poverty had decreased significantly. John Kennedy called for a “war against poverty” during the 1960 presidential campaign but made no major commitment to instigate it once he took office. In 1962, a short provocative book by Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, depicted the poor as an “invisible” mass of 40 to 50 million persons who were “maimed in body and spirit, existing at levels beneath those necessary for human decency.” Harrington’s book and “Our Invisible Poor,” an article by Dwight MacDonald published in the *New Yorker* in 1963, helped to renew the issue of poverty for Kennedy.

Historically, poverty in America was a social and an economic issue. The civil rights movement recast poverty and made it also a major political concern. Although blacks were the focus of several critical political struggles in the nation’s history, they were not major participants and were ignored as a direct political force. At the beginning of the twentieth century the nation’s blacks were still concentrated in Southern plantation regions,
their historical homelands where they had been recently stripped of their political power. Interregional migration, however, began to change blacks’ potential as a political force. By 1960, blacks were a political majority in several cities and congressional districts in the North where there were no voting restrictions. Despite seeming political inertia in the plantation regions, by 1960 the civil rights struggle, congressional passage of civil rights legislation, and federal court decisions indicated that the power of black votes would soon be unleashed in the South. Poverty was a critical issue to blacks. Not only was a large segment of the nation’s black population poor, but because black poverty, in part, was a product of discrimination, it was an issue linked directly to the civil rights movement.\(^\text{15}\)

Two events during the 1960 presidential campaign vividly demonstrated to Democrats the connection between racial issues and black voting. Although both the Republicans and the Democrats sought the endorsement of Martin Luther King Jr., he refused to back either Nixon or Kennedy. In October, King was arrested for participating in a sit-in at Rich’s, an Atlanta department store. Atlanta mayor William Hartsfield, a racial moderate, had King released from jail, but he was quickly rearrested on order of a DeKalb County court judge for violation of probation on a charge of driving without a license. The judge sentenced King to four months at the state prison at Reidsville. Neither Richard Nixon nor John Kennedy sought to intervene directly. Kennedy, however, called Coretta, King’s wife, to reassure her while Georgia governor Earnest Vandiver had the civil rights leader released. The media quickly spread news of the phone call, and the Democrats promoted the incident as evidence that Kennedy had more concern for blacks than Nixon. Kennedy received 68 percent of the black vote, whereas in 1956 Adlai Stevenson had received 61 percent. The outcome of the 1960 presidential election in Fayette County, Tennessee, reinforced for Democrats the relationship between black issues and voting. Under the Eisenhower administration the Justice Department had broken the hold of the all-white Democratic primary on the county. Counter to the national trend, most of the twelve hundred newly registered blacks voted for Nixon and caused Fayette County to go Republican for the first time since Reconstruction.\(^\text{16}\)

Just prior to his assassination in November 1963, Kennedy instructed Walter Heller, his principal economic advisor, to include an antipoverty initiative among the new legislative proposals to Congress. Lyndon Johnson learned of the antipoverty proposal shortly after he became president and told Heller, “That’s my kind of program.”\(^\text{17}\) In March 1964 Johnson
sent his antipoverty bill to Congress, and on August 20 he signed the Economic Opportunity Act, which initiated the War on Poverty.

R. Sargent Shriver, a former Chicago businessman who was a brother-in-law of John Kennedy’s and director of the Peace Corps, was selected by Lyndon Johnson to head the task force that drafted the Economic Opportunity Act. The legislation consisted of six interrelated programs: youth opportunity, community action, rural assistance, small loans, work experience, and volunteer workers.¹⁸ As Congress debated the antipoverty bill, relatively little attention was paid to the potential consequences of the programs. Most of the opposition to the legislation was directed at the structure and administration of the proposed War on Poverty. A large part of the debate over the impact of the legislation concerned Title III, the part of the bill specifically directed toward rural poverty. Title III authorized loans and grants to low-income rural families and the creation of corporations that could purchase and develop land for resale to poor farmers, a program reminiscent of the thwarted New Deal resettlement and tenant purchase projects a quarter century earlier. Breaking up large holdings for resale to small farmers still reeked too much of land reform. The Senate removed a section that authorized grants to small farmers and accepted an amendment by Senator Frank Lausche of Ohio which deleted the part that gave poor rural families the opportunity to purchase small farms. However, a section designed to improve housing, sanitation, and education for migrant and seasonal agricultural workers was added.¹⁹

Title II, Community Action, was the program that proved to be the most controversial. The greatest impact of Community Action was in Northern cities, where it became a device that organized and unleashed the urban poor. Ironically, the Community Action section of the bill was designed primarily for poor blacks in the plantation regions of the South, where the program also had a significant and far-reaching impact. According to Adam Yarmolinsky, a principal member of the task force that drafted the Economic Opportunity Act, because the problems of black ghettos in Northern cities were not fully comprehended in 1964, “Negro poverty was thought about and talked about largely in the geographical context of the Deep South.” Congressmen who represented Northern urban districts viewed the proposed antipoverty legislation “as a ‘grits and greens’ bill designed primarily to meet the problems of rural poverty in the South.”²⁰ Passage of the Economic Opportunity Act, however, was aided by the rediscovery of poverty in southern Appalachia, which was brought to national attention, in part, by Harry Caudill’s unforgettable Night Comes to
the Cumberlands, published in 1962. Congress might not have enacted the bill that Johnson sent to Congress “had Appalachia not supplied poverty with a white face.”

The Community Action section of the Economic Opportunity Act contained six programs: Head Start, Upward Bound, Legal Services, Health Centers, Local Initiative, and Demonstration Projects. The Community Action program was quickly seized upon both by those who wanted to help poor rural blacks and by rural blacks who wanted to help themselves. Community Action provided a method by which local blacks could organize in an attempt to achieve what the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act promised. Title VI of the Economic Opportunity Act, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), was a program through which civil rights workers could make a metamorphosis and become agents of economic, social, and political change with federal support.

What initially made the Community Action program innovative and controversial was that under the original bill local Community Action agencies could be organized and funded without any state or local government control. The task force that drafted the Economic Opportunity Act considered the provision to give aid directly to the poor through agencies that they controlled one of the most critical features of the bill. A principal concern was that Southern governors and state legislatures might deny poor blacks antipoverty programs. When the bill was drafted, mention of Alabama governor George Wallace’s name immediately quelled any discussion that questioned the provision whereby local Community Action groups could bypass state and local governments in seeking funding.

During congressional hearings, Southerners were concerned that Community Action grants might be given to new local organizations involved in civil rights. Title II was modified to require that Community Action grants be given only to public agencies, private nonprofit agencies with an established record of concern for the poor, or new private nonprofit agencies created by existing ones with established records.

Congressional efforts to restrict access of civil rights organizations to Office of Economic Opportunity programs were naive and meaningless, for the War on Poverty was an extension of the civil rights movement. Not only did civil rights workers organize Community Action agencies, but they also sought employment with the Office of Economic Opportunity. In San Francisco, the leaders of CORE filled the upper staff positions of OEO programs. Within the OEO, the unquestioned belief prevailed that civil rights and the efforts to eliminate poverty were essentially one and the same. At a July 1966 White House meeting of federal civil rights coordina-
tors held in the wake of Stokely Carmichael’s call for black power during the James Meredith march across Mississippi, Samuel Yette, special assistant to Sargent Shriver, emphasized that there was “an unusually high correlation between the goals of the civil rights movement generally, and the goals of the OEO.”

The civil rights mission of the OEO sometimes overshadowed the primary objective of alleviating poverty. OEO executives often took special effort to make the civil rights mission of the agency clear to Southern local officials. In the rejection of the application of the newly organized Gainesville-Hall County [Georgia] Community Action Program, John Dean stated, “The application contains language that is paternalistic and racist. . . . While I am sure there are individuals with this kind of thinking who have mauvered [sic] into positions of authority in CAPs in many places, must we now accept so blatant an example of it in an application requesting funds to correct the evils that these stereotypes created?”

The efforts to have provincial Southerners, who often had known only a segregated society, comply with even simple civil rights mandates sometimes led to delay and confusion. The chairman of the Heart of Georgia Community Action Council complained to Congressman William Stuckey Jr. in the spring of 1966 that after “two years, three re-organizations, four . . . elections and two futile mass meetings” to meet civil rights guidelines, he was ready to “throw in the towel.”

VISTA provided a ready-made avenue for civil rights workers to make the transition to community development. Problems arising from the civil rights activities of VISTA workers caused Markham Ball, the program’s director, to issue special guidelines. Ball acknowledged that “the problems of poverty and civil rights [were] closely connected” and that it was “natural and correct for . . . a VISTA Volunteer to see the battle for racial equality as one aspect of the War on Poverty.” But the volunteers were advised that their jobs required they “bridge the gap between the poor and the rest of the community”: “Where once you might have led a lawful protest, now . . . you will simply work quietly on the sidelines in ways that are less spectacular, but . . . more productive in light of the entire VISTA program.”

Civil rights activists who helped to organize local Community Action programs were not under the constraints of VISTA workers. For them, civil rights and poverty were so intertwined that the transition from civil rights activists to representatives of the poor was a simple, logical process. Leaders such as Thomas Levin, a New Yorker who became an organizer and the first director of the Child Development Group of Mississippi, a Head Start program, thought that “the movement” was “the only channel of com-
munication with the Negro poor and the only source of acceptable leadership.” He believed that the OEO staff was compromised by dealings and bargains with the Mississippi white power structure, while the true civil rights workers, the “law-abiders,” were those who had remained within “the movement.”

RESPONSES TO THE FEDERAL ANTIPOVERTY INITIATIVE

The War on Poverty was launched at the apex of the confrontational phase of the civil rights era. The initial responses of Southern state officials to the federal antipoverty initiative, especially to programs that could aid poor blacks in the plantation regions, varied. Officials astutely realized that substantial amounts of federal funds could be pumped into state and local economies, but they also sensed the civil rights mission in the OEO programs. A former school superintendent in Talbot County, Georgia, told an investigator for the agency that “numbers of people” were afraid that the program was a “vehicle to force integration.”

It quickly became apparent that if state and local governments did not take control of the OEO programs, federal funding would bypass them and go directly to private Community Action groups. State officials in Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, however, differed in their initial responses to the War on Poverty. Of the three, Georgia was in the best situation to devise quickly a public system to manage programs and funds, and Mississippi was the least equipped to assume immediate government control. Alabama officials wanted the infusion of new federal money, but the opposition of George Wallace to programs that might aid civil rights efforts in any way impeded the creation of public agencies that could secure and manage the federal funds.

In Georgia, the State Office of Economic Opportunity, a technical assistance agency, was established in November 1964, a few months after congressional passage of the Economic Opportunity Act. Using existing state-sponsored Area Planning and Development Commissions, regional community action agencies and community action committees began to be created. Some of the CAPs quickly became involved in a struggle over whether the new federal programs were to be extensions of the Area Planning and Development Commissions or independent agencies. The Area Planning and Development Commissions wanted to maintain control of the CAPs because of the federal funds they pumped into the agencies and because in some parts of Georgia the new planning agencies needed to show “immediate and tangible results.” Results could be demonstrated
more easily by OEO programs than through long-range planning and development. Area Planning and Development Commissions, however, varied significantly in leadership abilities of the local boards that supervised and the managerial abilities of the persons who administered them. In some lower Piedmont counties, the local white leadership was so lethargic that no one showed any interest in the antipoverty programs, even though they could pump badly needed funds into depressed economies. Oglethorpe County was described to an OEO official as a place where “everyone . . . who had any get up and go got up and went—black and white.” The county’s agricultural extension agent thought that “Oglethorpe’s big problem” was “apathy, . . . nobody care[d] about much of anything.” When questioned about local racial issues, the elderly superintendent of county schools baited the OEO investigator with the reply that “he inherited lands back in 1913 and 1914 and ‘it was as much my responsibility to look after the colored people as it was the mules.’”

Although integrated, most of the initial county CAP boards organized by the Area Planning and Development Commissions were structured so that white community leaders were in control. More than a year after launch of the War on Poverty, an OEO evaluation of the six-county Oconee Planning and Development Commission on the lower Piedmont found that the major problems were “lack of programs, applications, planning, and community action.” Only one of the six counties had an active CAP board, and it was “patterned after” the Atlanta CAP board, a “set up” that produced “control by power structure, with poor and Negroes relegated for the most part to [a] ‘Citizens Participation Committee.’” At the root of the problem in the Oconee district was an ineffective planning and development director who was controlled by the white power structure.

Ironically, the Planning and Development District that complied best with the civil rights guidelines of the OEO was located in the infamous Inner Coastal Plain plantation region of southwest Georgia, the scene of severe oppression of blacks. The eight-county West Central Georgia Planning and Development District at Montezuma initiated the OEO programs by hiring black and white codirectors and attempting to create local CAP boards that were racially integrated and democratically chosen. One “key man” was largely responsible for the district being “the best combination” of planning and economic opportunity in the state. Jimmy Carter, an Annapolis graduate and state senator, was chairman of the West Central Georgia Planning and Development Board. After the death of his father, Carter left the navy and returned to Plains, a small town in Sumter County near Albany, to manage the family’s agribusinesses, which included a pea-
nut warehouse. Carter worked to improve both race relations and the local rural economy. In 1965, a confident Carter told an OEO official, “We have received some criticisms regarding the racial aspects of EO but have ignored them. . . . Our commission . . . can stand on its own. It has stature and is respected in the area.”

The Chattahoochee Community Action for Improvement in the western part of the lower Georgia Piedmont plantation region was also among the more viable Georgia Community Action programs. The CAP’s district contained seven counties with a total of 156,000 persons, 36 percent of whom were blacks. The initial endeavors included Head Start programs in three counties, Neighborhood Youth Corps and health programs in two, and a Farmers Cooperative in one. VISTA workers assisted with the Neighborhood Youth Corps. An OEO investigation found a considerable number of problems in the Community Action programs, primarily the use of funds to subsidize the Planning and Development Agency and selection of the county CAP boards by the white power structure.

The commencement of the War on Poverty in Alabama corresponded with the climax of the civil rights movement. White hostility to anything that might assist blacks was at a peak, fanned by a race-baiting governor, the SCLC’s Selma voting rights campaign and Project SCOPE, and the efforts of the Office of Education to break the school segregation barrier. In January 1965, the same month that Martin Luther King Jr. initiated the Selma campaign, George Wallace appointed a thirteen-member committee composed of the heads of various state agencies to organize and oversee the Community Action programs in Alabama. The committee had no black members. The original plan Wallace devised for controlling the OEO poverty programs also called for creation of local CAP committees composed entirely of mayors of municipalities within a county. After the OEO rejected this scheme in a confrontation with Wallace over the composition of the board in Jefferson County (Birmingham), the governor’s next plan was to control the poverty programs by dividing the state into districts. District boundaries were gerrymandered to insure white majorities. Lowndes County, which was 81 percent black, was placed in a four-county district in which blacks constituted 37 percent of the population. A year into the War on Poverty, only two of what OEO officials regarded as “positive examples” of Community Action programs had been created in Alabama. One was in Tuskegee, which had Tuskegee Institute, a majority black population, and newly elected black city officials. The other was in Huntsville, a north Alabama city that was a center for the federal space program. A white businessman had organized a biracial Community Action committee in
The War on Poverty • 243

the rapidly growing city which had a large number of persons who were not Alabama natives.38

The lack of aggressive grassroots black leaders in Alabama’s plantation regions and the initial failure of state government to develop programs meant that representatives of the poor took the initiative to establish Community Action agencies for blacks. Field workers for the SCLC, SNCC, and the NAACP began to organize poor blacks and encourage them to demand their welfare rights as well as their civil ones. Macon, Lowndes, Dallas, Greene, Hale, and Wilcox Counties were areas of significant activity. Early in 1965, the NAACP began efforts to organize Community Action programs in Greene and Hale Counties. Orzell Billingsly, a Birmingham attorney, was the principal instigator and leader of the effort. Billingsly explained the plan to Sargent Shriver: “It is a fact of life in the South that in a given geographical area there are at least two communities—Negro and White. Our committee’s initiative has arisen within the Negro community. However, we are moving presently to contact members of the white community in our county. . . . If the white community rejects our offer to cooperate, . . . we plan to move ahead and apply for a grant.”39

To checkmate the nascent Community Action efforts of civil rights organizations in the Black Belt, George Wallace had the state Community Action Committee to begin the appointment of local CAP boards. The committee proposed for Greene County consisted of four whites and two blacks. The Greene County Community Action Program Committee organized by Orzell Billingsly and the local NAACP chapter protested to Shriver, alleging that “Negroes who ha[ d] been giving their very lives to the cause of social change” were “eliminated” from the state-appointed committee. They also complained about the control of the proposed committee by the white power structure, including the probate judge, the chairman of the county board of commissioners, and the mayor of Eutaw, the largest town. For blacks, the proposed committee could “only . . . maintain the system of exploitation and Negro dependence on the white man.”40

By the fall of 1965, more than a year after the creation of the OEO, Sargent Shriver and other high-level administrators were concerned about the failure of the agency’s programs to reach effectively the plantation regions of the Deep South. A field investigation of the western Alabama Black Belt by Tersh Boasberg, an OEO official, revealed that federal programs to assist the poor were not operating. None of the nine counties surveyed participated in either the surplus food or the newly initiated food stamp programs. Only 12 of Alabama’s 339 public housing projects and none of the state’s urban renewal projects were in the nine-county area. Six
of the nine counties had not submitted school desegregation plans to the Office of Education, and five did not receive any federal aid for public education. The area did not have a Neighborhood Youth Corps, an Adult Basic Education or Work Experience program, a VISTA worker, or a Community Action program other than Head Start. Six small Head Start programs and twenty-four rural loans were the extent of the War on Poverty in the area. At a recent hearing of the Commission on Civil Rights held in Demopolis, “Negroes in the audience laughed heartily and derisively at OEO’s fumbling and inadequate efforts to bring the Dream of Opportunity to the Blackbelt.”

Boasberg found that three major barriers impeded establishment of Community Action programs in the Black Belt. One was the lack of black community organizations outside of black churches. “No Negro has ever had experience in assessing community needs or planning comprehensive community programs.” The lack of expertise among poorly educated rural blacks to comprehend detailed instructions for submitting complicated OEO application forms also hindered organization of Community Action programs. The most important impediment to the OEO programs was the plantation South’s vertical social structure with its rigid caste and class system that prevented the cooperation of blacks and whites on community projects. Stated tersely, “face to face contact around the discussion table between Negroes and whites . . . [was] absolutely unheard of.” To retrieve the situation in the plantation regions, Boasberg recommended a project called “Operation Dixie.” Contrary to the innovative idea of the Economic Opportunity Act that the poor could and should administer their assistance programs, Boasberg concluded that it was “absurdly naive . . . to assume that poor, uneducated and inexperienced rural Negroes and whites [would] suddenly meet together to plan and organize an effective CAP.” “Operation Dixie” would be “a massive OEO effort to send into each county of the deep South, a person trained to organize and implement a comprehensive local Community Action Program,” including organization of local black leadership and initiation of racial cooperation.

Sargent Shriver and other top OEO officials had to be constantly aware of the federal agency’s delicate political situation in handling its revolutionary social programs. The intention of Alabama state officials to organize local Community Action committees checkmated the proposed intervention of the OEO at the grassroots level. Shortly after he suggested his local intervention scheme, Boasberg wrote Samuel Yette, “The problems that the Negroes are having in these counties would be materially affected if we
could implement a plan like Operation Dixie but I feel that things have proceeded to a stage beyond this in these five counties. . . . I feel it necessary we take some action here to resolve the questions and before we get into an outright hasole [sic] with Governor Wallace's Office.\textsuperscript{43}

In part, factionalism and squabbling among blacks interfered with success in organizing Community Action agencies and with the smooth operation of several that were created. Conflict even developed within the Tuskegee Community Action Program in 1965 as the result of the aggressiveness and “almost pathological drive” of its associate director, who, though respected, was feared.\textsuperscript{44} The schism that erupted between SNCC and the SCLC in January 1965, when the SCLC moved into Selma and the central Black Belt, which SNCC claimed as its territory, carried over into the War on Poverty. In 1966, the newly organized Dallas County and City of Selma Opportunities Board was ripped by a power struggle between members of the two civil rights organizations.\textsuperscript{45}

It was considerably easier for whites to obtain black members for Community Action committees than for blacks to solicit white members for committees that they initiated. Through long-established mechanisms extending from the first Reconstruction, and even back to slavery, ruling plantation-region whites had employed the services of the more affluent, better-educated black elites—landowners, ministers, teachers, and businessmen. According to Myrdal, “an upper class position in the Negro community nearly automatically . . . [gave] a Negro the role of Negro leader. He [was] expected to act according to this role by both whites and Negroes. . . . The whites soon learned that they could find as many ‘Uncle Toms’ among Negroes of upper class status as among the old-time ‘darkies,’ and that educated persons often were much more capable of carrying out their tasks as white-appointed Negro leaders.”\textsuperscript{46} When told by OEO officials to appoint blacks to Community Action committees, the white leaders instinctively turned to the traditional group of black elites.

The officers of the Wilcox County SCLC chapter complained to the OEO that two state senators were attempting to organize a Community Action program for Wilcox and Marengo Counties, ignoring their efforts to create one. The SCLC had failed in its attempt “to get their brothers in the power structure to cooperate with them in bringing the war against poverty to Wilcox County.” The board of the Community Action Program that whites organized was described as an example of “railroaded democracy.” Although it had ten black and thirteen white members, the blacks had no authority. Office of Economic Opportunity officials had no objec-
tion to blacks organizing Community Action agencies that had boards with no white members, but they expected proof that an exhaustive effort had been made to solicit white participation.47

Progress of the War on Poverty in Alabama continued to be impeded, and even the Huntsville CAP proved that it was not the “positive example” it initially was thought to be. Closer inspection revealed that the CAP was dominated by its chairman rather than governed by a board. Its programs were “old-line welfare activities,” including “a thinly disguised attempt to provide maids and gardeners for Huntsville’s booming suburban middle-class.”48 By the summer of 1966, two years after the antipoverty crusade was launched, OEO programs still had not effectively penetrated the Black Belt. Half of Alabama’s counties, including most of those in the Black Belt, did not have a functioning Community Action program, and some Black Belt counties still did not even participate in the Department of Agriculture’s food programs. At the instigation of civil rights workers, pathetic letters painstakingly written in wretched scrawls began to be sent to the White House and the Commission on Civil Rights. “It was five family on . . . [this] place that I know about are not farming because he [the white owner] have took the cotton land from these poor color people,” stated one letter. “All of the family that are living on his place have a house full of children. If you all can get a food program in Hale County, please hurry up because some of these poor people need one.”49

One means of establishing Department of Agriculture food programs outside local county governments was for Community Action agencies to administer them. However, the failure of the Community Action efforts in the Black Belt impeded implementation of this method of providing food to the poor. In 1966, the OEO attempted to create “single purpose organizations” to distribute the federal food. One of the first such organizations was established in Hale County, but it was obstructed by the local probate judge, who initially refused to approve the food program.50 Two years later, the federal food programs were still not well established in the Black Belt. The Commission on Civil Rights found that in 1968 approximately 75 percent of the public assistance recipients were not receiving food stamps.51

The lack of initial success of the Community Action programs in the Alabama Black Belt demonstrated the vulnerability of the provision in the Economic Opportunity Act for the programs to bypass hostile state and local officials. Such officials could be effectively evaded only if there were capable and aggressive local leaders and nonprofit organizations that would serve as sponsors for Community Action programs.

Mississippi did not have the effective state agency structure for creation
The War on Poverty • 247

and administration of Community Action programs which Georgia had, nor did it have a governor who, like George Wallace, attempted to block or secure tight control of all antipoverty programs. Initially, public officials in Mississippi, the nation’s poorest state, were apathetic to the War on Poverty. The first large OEO grant was not given to a state agency until more than a year after the commencement of the War on Poverty, when the Mississippi Department of Public Welfare received $1.6 million for Project HELP, a program to improve the distribution of USDA surplus food. Even Project HELP was an indirect result of private organizations. The state government proposed the food program to the OEO only after the Delta Ministry, an organization supported by the National Council of Churches, and the United States National Student Association sought to begin distribution of surplus food in Mississippi counties. Lack of interest by state and local officials meant that the largest share of initial OEO funds in Mississippi went to Community Action agencies sponsored by private organizations.52

Four agencies—Mid-State Opportunities, STAR, the Child Development Group of Mississippi, and Coahoma County Opportunities—controlled large shares of the thirty-one million dollars allocated to Mississippi OEO programs through January 1966. Mid-State Opportunities was created by a former member of the Mississippi House of Representatives and former director of the State Game and Fish Commission. STAR, which was closely affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, was a program to improve the literacy and vocational skills of the unemployed poor.53 The Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) was the most controversial of the initial private CAPs. The CDGM was established by civil rights workers associated with SNCC, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and the Delta Ministry, who recognized the need for day-care centers to serve the poor. Rejected by poor whites whom they contacted, the civil rights workers found significant interest in child day care among poor blacks. An application to fund day-care centers in several Mississippi counties was made to the OEO. The Child Development Group of Mississippi was an agency of Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE), an umbrella organization for various antipoverty groups. Although the CDGM did not seek to exclude white children, its outgrowth from civil rights organizations meant that its programs almost exclusively served blacks. The CDGM had to find a sponsor in order to meet the requirement of the Economic Opportunity Act that Community Action funds could only be given to private agencies with an established record of concern for the poor or to new nonprofit agencies created by existing ones. Mary
Holmes Junior College, a small obscure private school in Mississippi aided by the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, was approached by CDGM organizers. The trustees agreed for the college to serve as the sponsor, lured by the opportunity to become part of a “mission with a vision” and twenty thousand dollars to administer the grant.\(^{54}\)

Because the CDGM soon had Head Start projects in more than one-third of Mississippi’s counties, concern developed among state and local officials that the private nonprofit agency would shortly organize the entire state. Most of the counties in which CDGM established Head Start programs were in the Yazoo Delta and the central and northern parts of the Loess Plains. Bolivar was among the Delta counties in which the CDGM operated a Head Start program in 1965. Several white and black leaders, including two county commissioners, several planters, and the mayor of all-black Mound Bayou, believed that the county should assume control of the local Head Start and initiate other War on Poverty programs. They formed the biracial Bolivar County Community Action Program.\(^{55}\) The whites were motivated by the prospect of federal funds pumped into the local economy and by the belief that a radical group such as the CDGM, which promoted integration, should not have charge of education of the county’s black children. Although the board of the new Bolivar County CAP did not include the poor and the black members were selected by the whites, the OEO funded the new agency. It was “crucially important” that the program be funded, an OEO official stated, because this was “the greatest stride in the history of the county in race relations” and would “be a catalyst in moving the entire community toward the removal of present patterns.”\(^{56}\) That the mayor of Mound Bayou and other local blacks wished local control of the War on Poverty programs illustrates that race alone does not unite a people on issues. The biracial Bolivar Community Action Program soon found that it had competition from another new local organization, the all-black Association of Communities of Bolivar County, which an OEO investigator termed “a self-appointed ‘Committee of the Poor of Bolivar County.’ ”\(^{57}\)

As in Bolivar, whites in many other plantation counties across the South showed interest in War on Poverty programs only after local blacks or outside organizations had begun to create Community Action groups. Whites’ perception of blacks and their organizational capabilities continued to be strikingly naive. In the autumn of 1965, the Harris County, Georgia, ordinary (judge) told an OEO investigator, “As far as I know, local Negroes are not organized in any fashion. However, somebody is pushing Negro registration. I don’t know who it is.”\(^{58}\) White leaders in Coahoma
County, Mississippi, became interested in the War on Poverty only after they were told that the Southern Education and Recreational Association, a private nonprofit corporation, proposed a large antipoverty project. The whites were amazed that such a venture could have progressed as far as it had without them even knowing of it.

Jessie Epps, an electrician who was born in Coahoma County and had been part of the great migration of rural blacks to Northern cities, was the impetus behind the Southern Education and Recreation Association. A resident of Syracuse, New York, Epps was chairman of the local chapter of the International Union of Electrical Workers civil rights committee. The influx of Southern blacks had created a number of racial problems in Syracuse. Epps came to the conclusion that if the blacks who migrated from the rural South were better educated, their economic and social integration would be easier. The AFL-CIO and the Ford Foundation expressed interest in Epps' idea to create an adult education project in the Yazoo Delta. The War on Poverty began while plans for the project were in an embryonic stage, and the OEO was approached for funding.

Epps was able to interest several blacks in Coahoma County in the adult education project, including Aaron Henry, a Clarksdale pharmacist who was a major Mississippi civil rights leader, and Benny Gooden, a former classmate at Coahoma Junior College, a state school for blacks. To Epps' surprise, several prominent whites also expressed interest in the project, including Oscar Carr, a wealthy planter who was a graduate of the United States Naval Academy. Carr stated that he joined the effort to assist poor illiterate blacks because “one has to have compassion for his fellow man.” But, like most other prominent Mississippi whites who supported the War on Poverty, Carr also believed that lack of white leadership would mean black control of the antipoverty programs and more federal intervention in local affairs.59

Epps' idea for an adult education program led to the creation of the Southern Educational and Recreational Association, a nonprofit organization chartered in New York. In May 1965 the agency received a $345,000 OEO grant for its programs in Coahoma County. A few months later, Coahoma Opportunities, a Mississippi-chartered nonprofit organization with a biracial board of directors, replaced the Southern Education and Recreational Association as the agency through which OEO funds were channeled to the county.60 Although Coahoma Opportunities was only “within the rough parameters” of OEO guidelines and the rules were “bent in the areas of Civil Rights, Parent Participation, and Program Administration,” the organization was selected as a demonstration project. The OEO
gave Coahoma Opportunities more than $2.5 million during its first six months. Among the agency’s positive attributes were a group of moderate white community leaders who were willing to oppose conservative ones, a CAP board that had a “stormy past” but was “integrated 50/50” and seemed “to be working well,” a program administration that was “not bad,” and a black deputy director, Bennie Gooden, who was a “sharp enough” experienced administrator. By 1967, the Community Action programs had grown to include job development, legal aid, early childhood development, and medicare alert, in addition to adult education and Head Start. Coahoma was among only a few nonmetropolitan counties where the OEO funded an intense attack in the War on Poverty.

EMERGENCE OF A REDEFINED PATERNALISM

Neither rank-and-file blacks nor whites in the plantation regions initially comprehended the objectives and potential of the War on Poverty and its programs. To whites, the antipoverty programs, at best, wasted money on undeserving blacks. At their worst, they aided the civil rights efforts and eventually would lead to a takeover by blacks. To blacks, the programs were unfairly administered to prevent them from getting their fair share and to keep the white power structure in control. “We face the dilemma of being criticized sometimes for funding, and at other times for not funding, and frequently for funding the groups we do fund,” Samuel Yette lamented at the July 1966 White House meeting of federal civil rights coordinators. The superintendent of Harris County, Georgia, schools explained the segregated Head Start program to an investigator: “My hands are tied. If I had not moved nothing at all would have been done. I want to help these people, my conscience makes me do this, but I have already received criticism and this puts me in a bind. It is some accomplishment that white people here haven’t stood in the way of Negroes being helped.”

The disputes over the composition of Community Action boards confirmed that most whites still were not willing to share political or economic decisions with blacks. As the historical geographical cores of black population, the plantation regions still constituted the medieval nation, the holdouts of what forty years earlier Ulrich Phillips termed “a common resolve indomitably maintained” that the South “shall be and remain a white man’s country.” Expressed in the gutty, racist language of the sixties, this attitude of many whites is revealed in what William E. Young, president of the Coahoma County Board of Supervisors, allegedly said to Oscar Carr, a moderate, concerning the formation of a biracial Community Action
board: “Mr. Oscar, I know a nigger better than anyone in the county. I’m older than you and I’ve dealt with them all my life. Give a nigger an inch and he will take a mile. Aaron Henry [local head of the NAACP] ain’t coming to my office and he ain’t being appointed to any board I got anything to do with. I ain’t got education but I’ve experience dealing with niggers.” An attorney who was a leader of conservative whites in Coahoma County but had worked to improve funding for segregated facilities for blacks stated that Clarksdale had never had a biracial committee and that he opposed the creation of one. When asked about the need to improve communications between the races, he responded with a conventional contrived answer that dialogue had always been open. A few months after his trip to evaluate the OEO’s problems in the Alabama Black Belt, Tersh Boasberg conducted a similar field investigation in the Yazoo Delta. He found that conditions in the Delta were as bad as, if not worse than, those in the Black Belt, and he confirmed the closed-mind attitude of most whites. “Out of the subtle, exceedingly complex tangle of Mississippi politics, economics and customs,” wrote Boasberg, “at least two facts are unmistakable: (1) the white man has no intention of giving the Negro the franchise; and (2) the condition of the Delta Negro is abysmal. Any meaningful solution to the problem calls for massive Federal intervention, wholesale change in Mississippi politics, and huge programs planned and administered with Negro participation. While this is the goal, it is clearly unattainable at this time.”

Some planters, such as Billy Pearson, who owned the 1,500-acre Rainbow Plantation in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, in retrospect declared that the socioeconomic consequences of mechanization were oblivious to them. But as early as 1955, J. J. Breland, an attorney for the defendants in the Emmett Till murder trial, boasted: “The whites own all the property in Tallahatchie County. We don’t need the niggers no more.” However, one reason that some white leaders in the plantation regions resisted the War on Poverty or any type of program that might help to alleviate chronic poverty or assist blacks in any way was that they wished to encourage the migration of a people who increasingly were viewed as no longer having any economic purpose. More important, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and, especially, the 1965 Voting Rights Act made blacks a significant liability. Civil rights workers were “moving across barren and muddy fields from one clapboard plantation cabin to another, carrying out voter registration drives and forming community action groups.” Reenfranchisement and imminent desegregation threatened white political domination and the vertical caste-class social structure.
Federal programs that had been co-opted to manipulate black labor were now to be used to force blacks, not just from plantations, but from the plantation regions. A Coahoma County, Mississippi, planter candidly told OEO investigators that he opposed the agency’s programs because their real purpose was to disrupt the laws of supply and demand for cheap labor and to impede the out-migration of blacks from the Yazoo Delta. That many white leaders in the plantation regions did not have a genuine desire to recruit factories or initiate any new type of economic development to provide new job opportunities for blacks severed from the plantation system is illustrated by what the white chairman of the Bolivar County, Mississippi, CAP asked an OEO investigator. “Since no industry will be coming into Bolivar County why train people for jobs?” Another OEO official thought that “the important whites” in Hale County, Alabama, were “adamantly opposed to any anti-poverty program on the quaint grounds that they hope[d] to starve the Negroes out.” The editor of the county weekly newspaper, who owned several thousand acres in the Black Belt, told him, “We like our Nigras, but we can’t afford to keep ’em around.”

Some white leaders realized that all blacks would not migrate, and in counties with large numbers of blacks, their populations would remain relatively large. Furthermore, the tide of change rolling across the plantation South redefining traditional relationships between the races could not be stopped. Rather than resist the impending changes, these perceptive whites, like ones in Panola County, Mississippi, comprehended that only by acceptance of federal programs could they control them and continue their economic, political, and social domination. The War on Poverty was initiated in the midst of the rapid deterioration of the conventional relationship of rural blacks and whites. The demise of traditional intimate plantation paternalism was an important component of the redefinition of racial relationships. Although the old paternalism with its various types of favors and accommodation tied to the plantation system was outmoded, it could be replaced by a more anonymous form. Out of the turmoil of the 1960s emerged a new paternalism in which whites, together with some aggressive blacks, controlled and manipulated federal programs, especially the new antipoverty programs and transfer payments, to redefine and extend their domination.

At a biracial meeting held in race-torn Lowndes County, Alabama, to discuss a proposed comprehensive health program and a clinic to be built with OEO funds, a local white doctor asked, “If we, the Board of Health, do not take this program, could it inevitably come into the county anyway?” When an OEO official replied, “It could,” the doctor responded, “We’ll take
it, then.” According to John Hulett, the first black elected to public office in Lowndes County in the wake of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the health program was an example “of black people’s needs attracting lots of federal money for white officials to administer.”70 Although the OEO made a special effort to insure that blacks received at least some of the clerical jobs for the 1966 Project HELP food program in Mississippi, in Leflore County the venture had “the appearance of a program operated for Negroes by whites” because “a white staff certified plantation workers brought to them by white plantation owners.”71 In 1965, the NAACP cautioned that the War on Poverty offered a great opportunity to assist poor blacks, but in communities where they made up a large part of the population, which included central cities of the nation’s metropolises as well as the plantation regions, the programs could disintegrate into a form of “white welfare paternalism.” Two years later, Stokely Carmichael, SNCC’s promoter of black power, together with Charles Hamilton, warned of “welfare colonialism.”72

Once white leaders comprehended the relatively large sums to be spent in a local community by the OEO, together with the difficulty of continuing to resist the federal programs, they acquiesced. The initial checks paid to blacks working in the CDGM Head Start program in Holmes County, Mississippi, had to be cashed at a five-and-ten store in Lexington because the local banks and other white merchants would not honor them. When the bankers discovered that the local Head Start program had a budget of several hundred thousand dollars, the banks not only began cashing the checks but eagerly solicited the local program’s account. The First National City Bank of Clarksdale, Mississippi, sought the accounts of Coahoma Opportunities and also assigned an accountant as comptroller.73 By the early 1970s, the Lowndes County, Alabama, Comprehensive Health Program, which local white leaders reluctantly accepted, had an annual budget of $1.4 million and, with one hundred workers, was the county’s largest employer.74

Bolstered by the civil rights movement and by new federal laws, a new, more aggressive black leadership did not always acquiesce to whites’ assumption of new federal antipoverty and welfare programs. The programs often initiated local struggles over their control, not just among different white factions within a county or municipality but between whites and blacks. A white attorney in Taliaferro County on the lower Georgia Piedmont publicly charged that the two blacks who administered the local CAP were criminals. An investigator thought that “it was OEO’s $212,724 grant that evoked the strong reaction . . . ‘giving’ the money to a group of local Negroes instead of channeling it through the ‘proper people,’ i.e., elected
officials, that most incensed” the whites. The chairman of the Taliaferro Board of Commissioners candidly told the investigator, “It’s not that we don’t need the money, but it needs to be properly administered. . . . I feel that if the money comes here, I’m going to get my share of it, whether anyone else does or not.” In 1966, a white woman in Bacon County, Georgia, complained to Senator Herman Talmage that “the poor” were not hired in a local Community Action program. Although her family’s income exceeded the three thousand dollar annual limit required to qualify for a job with the local CAP, wives of more affluent members of the white community were employed. The spouses of the county tax assessor and owner of a local apparel factory were among the employees, and the wife of a county commissioner was director of the program. “Old City” and “Southerntown” were among the places where whites and blacks clashed over the control of Community Action programs. In Natchez, two whites who worked closely with blacks to create a Community Action agency were removed from the board when state officials insisted that established local white leaders be appointed. At Indianola, a nascent Community Action agency organized by members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party charged that Sunflower County Progress, the agency funded by the OEO, was “hostile to . . . the very people it purport[ed] to serve” and had a biracial board whose black members were puppets of the white power structure.

The belated efforts of Mississippi state officials to control OEO programs and the civil rights activism of the Child Development Group of Mississippi led to a major confrontation that made the federal agency appear to have been compromised. In 1965, Mississippi senator John Stennis launched an investigation of the CDGM. Both a Senate subcommittee and an OEO study found that the CDGM had problems in meeting certain standards for Community Action programs. A new agency, Mississippi Action for Progress, was established by state officials to replace the CDGM as the primary sponsor of Head Start programs in the state and included Aaron Henry, Hudding Carter III, and LeRoy Percy on the board. As an alternative to Mississippi Action for Progress, civil rights workers organized Friends of the Children of Mississippi in 1966. During its first eighteen months the new Community Action Head Start program operated on a small grant from the Field Foundation. After the OEO began funding the agency in 1966, its Head Start programs spread to fifteen counties, most of which were in the Yazoo Delta.

Two decades after the War on Poverty began, a journalist’s description of the welfare office in Tunica County, Mississippi, could have been one from
scores of counties across the plantation South. After passing by the desks of
the staff, which included a cordial, well-dressed black woman, he reached
the director’s office. The wife of a former state senator, the director was “an
immaculately dressed white woman behind a cluttered desk, with a beaded
necklace, rosy cheeks and two diamond rings on her left hand.” Her de­
tachment from the plight of the poor blacks in her care was centuries old,
stretching not only across the New South but reaching into the Old.
Seventy-three percent of Tunica County’s residents received some type of
welfare. The director told the journalist, “I don’t think there’s a feeling of
hopelessness here.”

Although in the 1990s the War on Poverty was generally regarded as a fail­
ure, not all of the programs that it initiated were abandoned, nor did they
fail to produce important results. The Community Action programs, espe­
cially, had a significant impact in the plantation regions. Foremost, Office of
Economic Opportunity guidelines that required boards of community ac­
tion groups to include members of racial-minority groups challenged the
vertical social structure of the plantation regions. Poor black day laborers
found themselves sitting across the table from affluent white planters. Even
though whites usually dominated them, the biracial boards were precedent­
setting in symbolic equality. A black board member of Coahoma County
Opportunities thought that the Community Action program gave moder­
te whites “a legitimate vehicle for association and communication with
Negroes.”

In clashes with blacks over the composition of boards and
control of OEO programs, whites discovered a more competent leadership
among blacks than what they traditionally perceived. Protected by federal
laws and guidelines, blacks were not as afraid to confront whites. Once the
dialogue between blacks and whites was opened, it was extended beyond
matters of Community Action committees. The eyes of some moderate
whites were opened for the first time, and they began to comprehend the
destitute condition of many of the blacks among whom they lived. A white
board member of Coahoma County Opportunities candidly admitted that
he initially became involved to control the agency, but he later became
“committed to the program because the need [was] so great.”

OEO programs also placed blacks in white-collar jobs where they dealt
with whites as equals and were overt role models. At the initiation of
Mississippi’s Project HELP in 1966, the only jobs held by blacks in the
Mississippi Welfare Department were as warehouse laborers. Although the
OEO was not successful in efforts to get the department to hire black
supervisors, almost seventy were employed in clerical positions in state and
county offices. In a few Community Action programs, blacks were em-
ployed as assistant directors or codirectors. Although James Hamilton, the codirector of the West Georgia Planning and Development District, initially worked only with blacks, soon he and Robert Bailey, a Georgia native who was the white codirector, began appearing together at local meetings.83

Community Action programs also helped blacks to take advantage of other federal programs. In part, this came through dissemination of information about the federal programs from Community Action groups. Participation in Community Action meetings gave rural blacks more confidence in throwing off the constraints imposed by the plantation. Most important, Community Action programs permitted leadership of Southern rural blacks to move beyond the confines of the black church to which it had been largely limited since emancipation. Ironically, the longstanding role of churches in black communities is what made poor rural blacks better prepared than poor rural whites to take advantage of Community Action programs. Officials of the Chattahoochee Community Action for Improvement found that assistance to whites was limited because they were “much more widely dispersed throughout the region, . . . less organized, and . . . much less noticed than the Negro group.”84 Local civil rights activities had prepared the way for blacks to serve on Community Action boards and as directors of programs. The steps beyond community action boards were participation in political parties and then election to public offices.