

POVERTY

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POVERTY

The United States in the 1960's was the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Thanks to ample natural resources and a highly developed technology, most of its citizens lived lives of comfort and affluence unimaginable a century before. It was also a nation with a record of generosity to other nations. It had lent and given billions of dollars to western Europe and to newly born and have-not countries all around the globe.

Yet in the midst of unprecedented American prosperity there existed—although often invisible to visitors from foreign lands—the paradox of poverty. It was estimated that 35 million persons, or one fifth of the population, existed in conditions of want, or near want. Of these, 11 million were children. Although statisticians disagreed on definitions of poverty, there was ample evidence that 6 million families were attempting to feed, shelter, and educate their youngsters on grossly inadequate incomes.

Older Americans remembered the Great Depression of the 1930's when, in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's words, one third of the nation was "ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." There was nothing invisible about poverty then. There were long lines outside employment offices. There were apple

Sargent Shriver, the chief architect and administrator of the federal government's war on poverty, discusses the paradox of persisting want in the midst of affluence. Another view of these problems may be found in the article ABUNDANCE by economist Stuart Chase.

sellers in Wall Street. It was during this period that the government introduced federal programs for health and welfare, social insurance, and unemployment compensation.

The tremendous industrial effort that began with World War II expanded production to peaks previously unknown. And, despite minor recessions, production continued to expand. By the mid-1960's, for example, there were estimated to be 71 million automobiles in the United States.

But in its 1964 annual report to the President, the Council of Economic Advisers said:

"There will always be some Americans who are better off than others. . . . In the United States today we can see on the horizon a society of abundance, free of much of the misery and degradation that have been the old fate of man. Steadily rising productivity, together with an improving network of private and social insurance and assistance, has been eroding mass poverty in America. But the process is far too slow. It is high time to redouble and to concentrate our efforts to eliminate poverty."

Shortly after the report was issued, President Lyndon B. Johnson called for an "all-out war on poverty." In August, 1964, Congress passed legislation setting up the Office of Economic Opportunity—with the authority of the White House behind it—to direct and coordinate the efforts of many government and private agencies toward this end. On Oct. 8, 1964, Congress provided the money, \$800 million, to start the attack.

It was a bold and imaginative program that commanded worldwide attention. Sponsors of the legislation knew that it would not end poverty overnight. But it was a beginning.



... THE HOPELESS

THE MEANING OF POVERTY

From Biblical to modern times the great majority of people were poor. They were poor, however, in *things* rather than in *food*. Except in times of regional crop failures or plague or disastrous wars, there was generally enough food to go around. But even the few who enjoyed great riches—the barons, the great landowners, the aristocracy—might be considered “poor” by today’s standards. None of them enjoyed free education through college, expert medical care, or the chance for worldwide travel. None of them knew such conveniences as central heating, hot running water, electricity, or the automobile—all of which are now available to families with modest incomes throughout the United States.

Origins. Poverty as a social problem first came to be recognized in Europe and the United States during the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 1700’s. A slow, stately agricultural economy gave way to the hustle and bustle of factories. Soot and smoke blackened the skies. Working people abandoned the spaciousness of farms for the day wages and distempers of factories and slums. The Industrial Revolution transformed the Western world, created great private fortunes, and permitted giant steps in man’s material progress. But it accomplished all this at a considerable price in human misery.

Under feudalism, in theory at least, the landowner had been responsible for the welfare of his

tenants. Often rural landowners had little more education than their inferiors and shared with them a crudity of manners and a love of blood sports. Henry Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones*, written in the 1700’s, gives an excellent, rollicking picture of the rough justice and paternalism of the rural squire.

The landowner’s sense of personal responsibility for his workers did not carry over to the factory owner in England, the coal operator in Wales, or, later, the steel magnate in the United States. Their behavior was consistent with the *laissez-faire* theory of economics as expounded by Adam Smith.

This may seem paradoxical, for in his time Adam Smith was a reformer, a fact that many people now overlook. He wanted to take away the special privileges that had been granted to favored subjects by British kings. When such privileges and restraints are abolished, he wrote, “the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord.”

The system he believed in was based on the “free market.” It was a market of self-interest and competition. The factory owner would buy as cheaply as he could and sell as profitably as he could. Adam Smith believed in a free market for labor as well as for materials. He wrote that competition also existed for labor: if the factory owner would not pay enough, workingmen would move on for higher wages.

But the supply of cheap labor seemed endless. The population expanded at an unprecedented rate during the Industrial Revolution. Workers migrated



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to the cities from farms that would no longer feed their large families.

For the most part, these transplanted country people were ignorant and untutored. Whatever country skills they possessed no longer availed them in the slums in which they settled. Whole families worked 14 hours a day in dark, airless mills. They did not move on for higher wages because they were too many to command higher wages. Jobs were scarcer than people.

Both in England and in the United States, there was concern for these transplanted people. But it was moral concern rather than concern for their material needs. In their villages, they had been subject to the spiritual authority of a church. In the cities, many of them were without anchor or direction. Drunkenness and depravity became more common in the streets as distilled liquors became cheaper. Scenes of such debauchery were dramatically documented by William Hogarth, the English artist.

Educated people were slow to connect the sins of the slum poor with the misery of their lot. Richard Cobden, for example, was a reformer and a friend of the laboring classes. Yet, as Stuart Chase pointed out, as late as 1847 Cobden voted in Parliament against the 10-hour working day because he believed workers needed "the discipline of the factory."

Caste-conscious society seemed to be afflicted with double vision when it looked at poverty. On the one hand, poverty was regarded as a spiritually elevating condition. Jesus Christ had said: "Sell all

thou hast and follow me." St. Francis of Assisi and the founders of many Christian orders took vows of poverty so that they might be concerned with things of the spirit rather than with worldly things. On the other hand, poverty was regarded as something disgraceful. In some way, it was thought, the poor man must be responsible himself for the wretchedness of his condition. This ambiguity still survives in some archaic minds.

George Bernard Shaw attacked the callousness of the governing classes in the introduction to his play *Major Barbara* in 1905. He wrote:

"We tolerate poverty as if it were either a wholesome tonic for lazy people or else a virtue to be embraced as St. Francis embraced it. If a man is indolent, let him be poor. If he is addicted to the fine arts or to pure science instead of to trade and finance, let him be poor. If he chooses to spend his urban eighteen shillings a week or his agricultural thirteen shillings a week on beer and his family instead of saving it up for his old age, let him be poor. Let nothing be done for 'the underserving': Let him be poor. . . ."

"Now what does this Let Him Be Poor mean? It means let him be weak. Let him be ignorant. Let him become a nucleus of disease. Let him be a standing exhibition and example of ugliness and dirt. Let him have rickety children. . . . Let his habitations turn our cities into poisonous congeries of slums. . . . Let the undeserving become still less deserving."

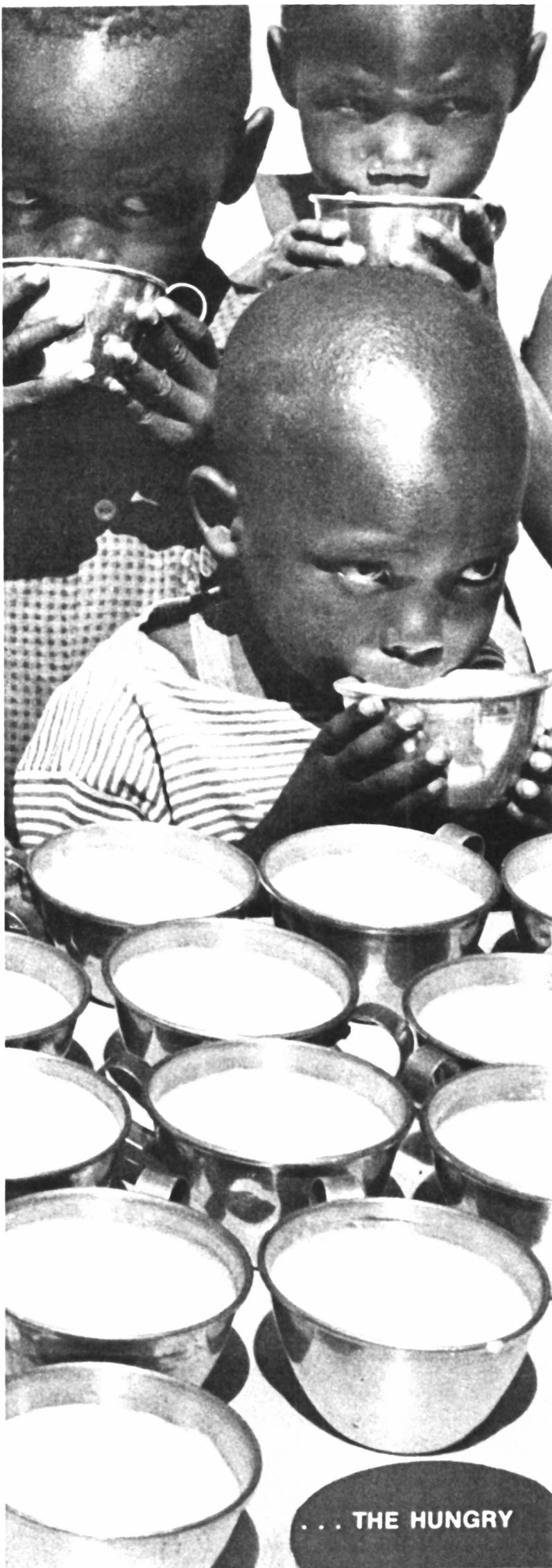
Kinds of Poverty. Economists differ in their definition and classification of poverty. In his book *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith described three types of poverty in the United States: generalized poverty, island poverty, and case poverty. Other economists, viewing the problem in worldwide terms, have spoken of *collective* poverty, *cyclical* poverty, and *individual* poverty.

(1) *Collective poverty* exists in nations or regions where economic resources do not meet the needs of the population. India, where millions live on a diet just above starvation level, is a prime example. China, which turned to communist leaders in vain hope of relief, is another. The peasants of some South American countries have existed on an almost permanent level of privation. Ignorance and exploitation have contributed to their poor condition.

(2) *Cyclical poverty* is widespread but periodic. In an industrial economy, it is usually caused by lack of purchasing power. A memorable example is the Great Depression of the 1930's, with its mass unemployment. In an agricultural economy, it usually occurs with failure of crops. Pearl Buck in her novel *The Good Earth* presented a moving account of hordes of starving peasants migrating from a land stricken by famine.

(3) *Individual poverty* is harder to define. It can be loosely classified as poverty that is not caused by general economic trends.

Every culture has wrestled with the problem of individual poverty. There have always been widows and orphans, the sick and the aged, the dull, the incapable, and the intemperate. In the past, their care usually fell upon the local community, the church, or private charity. Almost forgotten today is the almshouse or poor farm where towns and countries sheltered their paupers. To many of the needy, it represented the last step down in personal defeat.



... THE HUNGRY

CHAD, AFRICA - MARC AND EVELYNE BERNHEIM FROM RAPHO GUILLUMETTE

Central governments began to assume at least some responsibility for the relief of the poor in the late 1800's. This movement began in Germany under the authoritarian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Systems of social insurance were formulated. The poor began to be treated more like people and less like convicts. This, however, did not solve the problem of individual poverty in the midst of general prosperity.

In the United States and elsewhere, a strong back and a willingness to work cheap were once ample qualifications for employment. Manual laborers dug the ditches and constructed the transcontinental railroads. They picked cotton and fired the steel furnaces. But now the automation of industry and the mechanization of agriculture have made employment scarcer for the unskilled and the poorly educated.

PROBLEMS OF POVERTY

Between the depression years of the 1930's and the war on poverty of the 1960's, there was relatively little investigation into the causes of poverty in the United States. Because of a lack of information, a number of misconceptions about this complex problem became widespread. Some persons denied the problem on the ground that even those at the bottom of an affluent society were better off than members of most other societies, past or present. Others acknowledged the problem but dismissed it as one that would automatically disappear as national wealth increased. A few called for drastic revisions in the economy to achieve a redistribution of wealth. Still others continued to see poverty as a sign of lack of initiative by the poor.

Problems of Wealth Distribution. How much real purchasing power does an average family have? In terms of dollars, the average family income in the United States in 1963 was \$6,249. But did this amount represent more or less purchasing power than that of families in other major nations?

Although such comparisons are difficult, one study did shed some light on the subject. Economists calculated the cost at retail prices of an adequate meal for a family of four in several countries. Then they translated the cost into the number of hours an industrial employee in each of the countries would have to work to pay for it. In the United States he had to work one hour, in Denmark an hour and a half, in West Germany and Great Britain two hours, and in Italy five hours.

Such comparisons, of course, could not be made in the Orient, the Middle East, and other underdeveloped areas. There a day's work often provided the peasant with only enough sustenance to prevent hunger pains.

There were also inadequate data for comparison with communist nations. A walk from democratic West Berlin to communist East Berlin, however, seemed to many tourists to take them from urban prosperity to urban desolation. Unquestionably the Soviet Union had become a great military and nuclear power by the mid-20th century. But its extraordinary effort was obtained through the harsh regimentation of the Russian people by a monolithic government. Only limited facilities were put to producing consumer goods.

Do the rich get a larger share of the total income in the United States than in other countries? Many Europeans believe they do, perhaps remembering sensational stories about the luxurious living of

American multimillionaires. But this is not true, according to data collected by Professor Simon Kuznets of Harvard University, an authority on income distribution. Income distribution is about the same in the United States as it is in Denmark, Sweden, and Britain. And it is much more nearly equal in the United States than in most other countries for which such information is available.

Why then is there poverty in the United States? It seems clear that the nation has enormous wealth in terms of real purchasing power, and that its wealth is comparatively evenly divided. But poverty still does exist. It exists because the prosperity that raised the living standards of most of the people has not reached the really poor.

Who Are the Poor? Opinions vary about the income necessary to maintain an "adequate standard of living" for an urban family of four. In 1959, Professor Robert Lampman of the University of Wisconsin put it at \$2,500. A few years later, this amount was probably no longer adequate. But in 1962 there were 5.4 million families with income below \$2,000. More than a million children were being reared in large families, with six or more children each, on less than \$2,000 a year. For this group, hairsplitting about the statistics of poverty was unnecessary. These Americans were poor, and there could be no doubt in anyone's mind about it.

The poor also included many who lived alone or, without family ties, in boarding houses and drab hotels. The Council of Economic Advisers reported that 5 million of these "unrelated individuals" had incomes below \$1,500. Of these, 3 million had incomes below \$1,000.

In the main, the unrelated individuals were aged or aging people who subsisted on small pensions, small savings, or public relief. In their working years, some had not been eligible for Social Security. Others had always worked for low pay. They received none of the benefits of the increasing strength of labor unions because they worked in nonunionized fields. And many were employed in service industries, where the federal minimum wage law did not apply.

Problems of the Poor. "Poverty breeds poverty," in the words of the Council of Economic Advisers' report. "A poor individual or family has a high probability of staying poor. Low incomes carry with them high risks of illness; limitations on mobility; and limited access to education, information, and training. Poor parents cannot give their children the opportunities for better health and education needed to improve their lot. Lack of motivation, hope, and incentive is a more subtle but no less powerful barrier than lack of financial means. Thus the cruel legacy of poverty is passed from parents to children."

A sample study of recipients of aid to families with dependent children showed that more than 40 percent of the parents had been reared in families receiving public assistance. And other statistics showed that 61 percent of poor families were headed by persons who had completed no more than elementary school. By contrast, less than 7 percent of poor families were headed by persons with some college education.

The rise in juvenile delinquency has justifiably excited newspaper editorial writers. But few of them associate the rise with the scarcity of jobs available to teenagers. In 1964 national unemployment had been reduced to 5 percent. But among



JORDAN, ASIA - W. H. O.

... THE SICK

youngsters between the ages of 16 and 21 who were not in school, the unemployment rate was 15 percent. Among Negro teenage boys and girls, the rate was 25 percent.

This was the kind of discouraging evidence uncovered when the national problem of poverty was examined in the middle 1960's.

THE WAR ON POVERTY

Both President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson undertook a varied attack on the problem of poverty. Three major parts of their attack focused on tax reduction, civil rights, and the poverty program.

With a growing population, the United States would need an accelerated growth of national production to maintain high employment. To effect this growth, President Kennedy recommended a tax reduction. After President Kennedy's death in November, 1963, President Johnson carried on the administration's legislative program. The tax reduction bill was passed by Congress in the spring of 1964.

Civil rights legislation also had a direct bearing on the problem of poverty. It was clear that the poor included a disproportionate number of Negroes and other nonwhite minorities, largely because of discrimination practiced against them. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, designed to correct some of these injustices, was passed in June, 1964.

President Johnson initiated his own bill to augment the fight against poverty. Called the Economic Opportunity Act, it was passed by Congress in August, 1964. Approximately \$800 million was appropriated in October, 1964, to finance its first year's operation.

Civil Rights. The 1964 Civil Rights Act had both social and economic aims. In effect, it was a moderate law. It provided Negroes and others with legal means of achieving the rights already guaranteed them by the Constitution of the United States.

It had been amply demonstrated that discrimination against Negroes, Indians, and Latin Americans, including Puerto Ricans, reduced their employment opportunities. But discrimination did more than that. It instilled in minority groups a hopelessness that inhibited ambition and limited educational advance. Almost half of nonwhite Americans were poor. Infant mortality was twice as high for them as for whites. Maternal deaths were four times as frequent.

In addition to being a moral issue, discrimination is costly to the economy. Both labor unions and industry have been guilty of discriminating because of race and color. By doing so, they robbed society of the potential talents of about one ninth of the population.

The Poverty Program. President Johnson's poverty program had the following objectives: (1) improving regional economies in cooperation with states; (2) rehabilitating urban and rural communities; (3) expanding educational and job opportunities for youth; (4) promoting adult education and training; and (5) providing community help for the growing numbers of aged poor.

In the past, there was a conviction that economic growth alone would take care of the problem of poverty. But in 1964 the Council of Economic Advisers thought otherwise. "We cannot leave the further wearing away of poverty," the council said in its report, "solely to the general progress of the economy. A faster reduction of poverty will require that the lower fifth of our families be able to earn a larger share of national output."

The administrators of the Office of Economic Opportunity, set up by the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, gave immediate attention to the young. It seemed to them that without adequate education the sons and daughters of the poor would never break through economic barriers. Out of this conviction, the Job Corps was established. The Job Corps sought to remove youngsters from both city and rural slum environments, give them useful labor in Job Corps Centers, and provide basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Work-training and work-study programs were also provided. The work-training program sought to give both jobs and job-training to young men and women in their home towns. The work-study program gave children of poor families a chance to work their way through college.

The Economic Opportunity Act emphasized local initiative in the struggle against poverty. It encouraged local leaders to produce blueprints for action in their own cities and communities. When the local programs were approved by the Office of Economic Opportunity, the federal government assumed 90 percent of the cost for a period of two years.

These local projects included educational programs, such as preschool programs, remedial reading, and special classes for school dropouts. There were also job-training projects for youth and adults. Other projects included health clinics, guidance and counseling for poor families, and programs for the aged.

Under the Economic Opportunity Act, loans of \$2,500 could be extended to rural families to help them toward self-sufficiency. Loans up to \$25,000 were made available to help small businessmen. For migrant workers, there were programs for housing, sanitation, education, and child care. To help unemployed fathers get off relief rolls, work experience programs were provided for them. And a

"Our Objective: Total Victory"

"... I have called for a national war on poverty. Our objective: total victory.

"There are millions of Americans—one fifth of our people—who have not shared in the abundance which has been granted to most of us, and to whom the gates of opportunity have been closed.

"What does this poverty mean to those who endure it?

"It means a daily struggle to secure the necessities for even a meager existence. It means that the abundance, the comforts, the opportunities they see all around them are beyond their grasp.

"Worst of all, it means hopelessness for the young."

From President Lyndon B. Johnson's Message on Poverty to Congress, March 16, 1964.

unique organization, which was called Vista Volunteers (Volunteers in Service to America), was created. This organization encouraged Americans to volunteer their full-time services in the war against penury and want.

The ultimate aim of the government's drive against poverty was once described in these words: "to provide the young with the opportunity to learn, the able bodied with the opportunity to work, the poor with the opportunity to live in decency and dignity."

President Lyndon Johnson spoke firmly of the future in his message on poverty to Congress on March 16, 1964:

"... this program is much more than a beginning. Rather it is a commitment. It is a total commitment by this President, and this Congress and this nation, to pursue victory over the most ancient of mankind's enemies.

"On many historic occasions the President has requested from Congress the authority to move against forces which were endangering the well-being of our country.

"This is such an occasion.

"On similar occasions in the past we have often been called upon to wage war against foreign enemies which threatened our freedom. Today we are asked to declare war on a domestic enemy which threatens the strength of our nation and the welfare of our people. If we now move forward against this enemy—if we can bring to the challenges of peace the same determination and strength which has brought us victory in war—then this day and this Congress will have won a secure and honorable place in the history of the nation, and the enduring gratitude of generations of Americans yet to come."

HISTORY OF POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States has had several unique advantages in satisfying the material needs of its citizens. For a hundred years, its rich western frontier offered the promise of another chance to those who

felt limited by local conditions either within the United States or elsewhere. Policies of open immigration brought to the United States the talents of all the world's peoples. American technological ingenuity created undreamed of prosperity.

But each of these advantages has brought accompanying problems. The frontier inspired a tradition of individualism that sometimes made the needed social action difficult to achieve. Immigration raised problems of discrimination against minorities. And prosperity has often blinded Americans to the plight of their poor. Until recently, legislation on behalf of the poor has seldom been advanced in the United States except in times of economic crisis.

Early Economic Growth. The rise of industrialism caused far less social dislocation in the United States than it had caused in Europe. One reason was that the American population consisted largely of immigrants and pioneers.

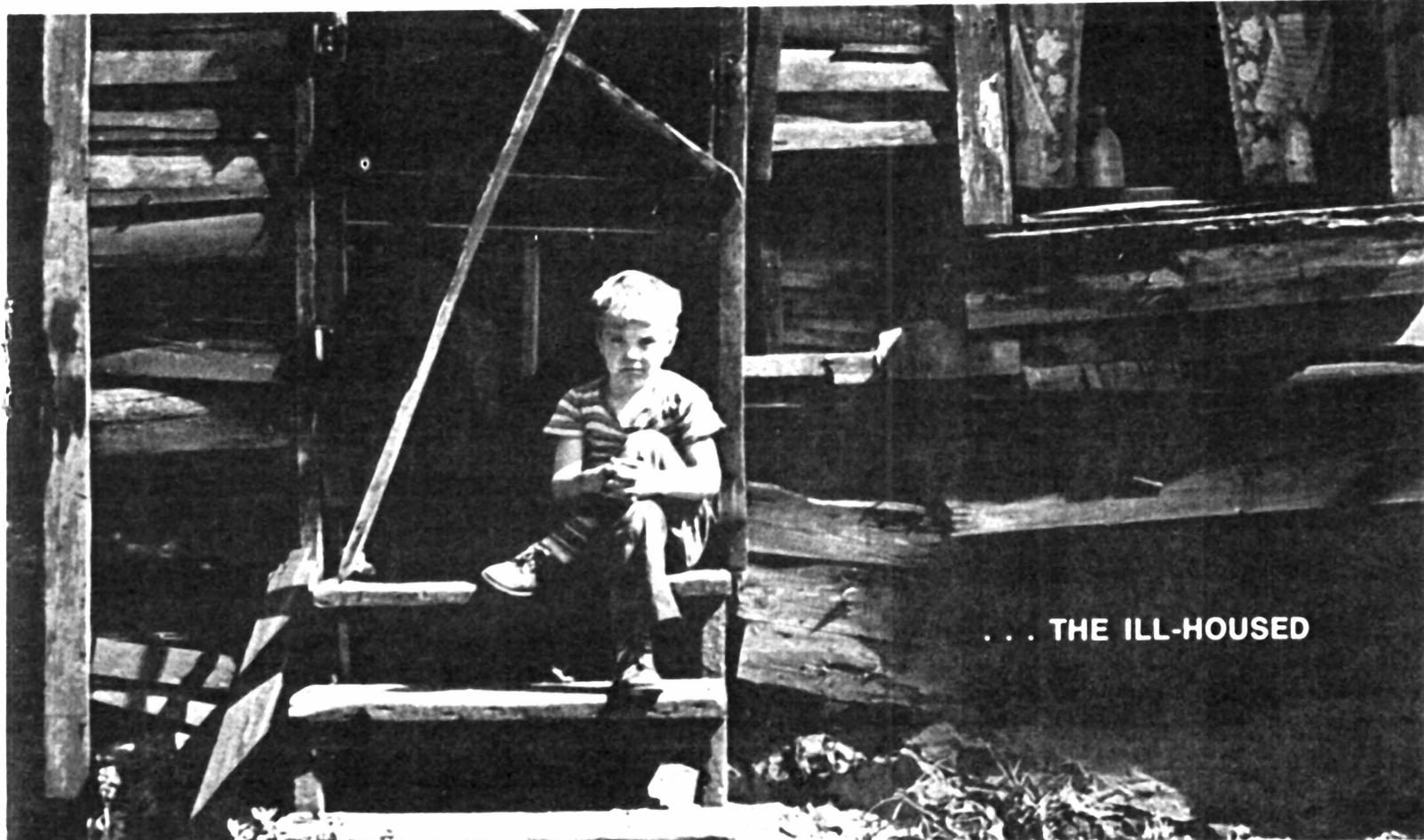
In the beginning, the American republic welcomed immigration from the Old World. It was not only a matter of democratic principle—there was also a vast empty continent to populate.

The prospect of free land in western United States was a magnet to the adventurous. It produced a vigorous citizenry, that seemed always on the move. Many Americans retained their independence even though they were poor. Instead of accepting the regimentation of the mill and the furnace, they chose the gamble and the freedom of the western frontier.

With its seemingly limitless frontier, the United States remained a land of labor scarcity for more than a hundred years. The growth of heavy industry in the 1800's created an increasing demand for labor that could not be satisfied by local markets.

The national policy of unrestricted immigration lasted until the end of World War I. More than 8 million persons emigrated across the Atlantic in the decade from 1901 to 1910 alone. The floods of new recruits from foreign countries were willing

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to accept the hard work and long hours of factory life. At first, many of these immigrants were docile and immune to labor union organization. Even if wages were low, the immigrant was still better off financially than he had been in southern or eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, ingenious American artisans and mechanics were introducing important technological innovations. Self-taught engineers harnessed brooks and rivers for waterpower to run mills. Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which made a rich plantation empire of the American South. Whitney also introduced the practice of making interchangeable parts for machinery, which in itself revolutionized technology. Later, Henry Ford developed this idea still further. He introduced the assembly line in his automobile factories and thus became the father of modern mass production.

The Great Depression. In his book *The Future as History*, Robert Heilbroner wrote: "In the folklore of our country we still look back to 1929 not only as a year of great business prosperity but as a year of widespread and fundamental wellbeing. But when we examine the economy of 1929 critically, we find that the facade of business prosperity concealed an inner structure of widespread economic frailty."

The crash of the stock market in 1929 and the depression of the 1930's occasioned a profound disillusionment in the United States. Many Americans felt a confusion and a sense of despair such as never had been known before.

The United States was no longer a land of labor scarcity. Moreover, the people lost faith in the country's financial leadership. One after another, banks failed and what were supposed to be solid corporate structures fell apart. Unemployment reached a peak of 15 million.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggested a wide pattern of legislation to bolster the economy and relieve the distressed. Congress passed the Social Security Act in 1935. The same year, the Wagner Act was enacted to protect the rights of labor. The Securities and Exchange Commission was created to police unbridled speculation in the stock market. Federal programs of public works were inaugurated and federal spending was increased to create jobs for the idle.

World War II and After. Full recovery from the depression did not come until World War II, when American industry went into high gear producing war materiel. Technological miracles were achieved to enable the Allied armed services to win a conflict in two hemispheres.

During the war years, there was a tremendous growth in family incomes. High wages were earned as factories worked around the clock, but prices were government-controlled. Because few consumer goods were available, much of the money went into savings. Measured in dollars of constant purchasing power, or what economists call "real income," average yearly take-home pay of families rose by about \$800 in the five years from 1941 to 1946—an increase of about \$160 a year.

Although mass unemployment at the end of the war had been widely predicted, industry remained in high gear. As price controls were removed, industry returned to a peacetime economy and began meeting the huge backlog of demand for consumer goods.

There were recessions in the postwar period. But, in the words of Herman P. Miller of the U.S. Census Bureau, who contributed much to the study of poverty in his analyses of statistical data, these recessions were "minor economic ripples compared with the national depressions each previous generation of Americans experienced." By 1960 real family income per year had risen by \$1,000 over family income in 1946.

The Present and the Future. Professional economists have their own measurement of national well-being. They call it Gross National Product—the total value of all goods and services produced in a year. The Gross National Product measurement is admittedly inexact, but it does satisfactorily reflect currents and trends in the economy. Valued in 1963 prices the Gross National Product in 1929 was \$214 billion. In 1933 it had fallen to \$150 billion. In 1964 it rose to an unprecedented \$600 billion. And there was every indication that it would continue to rise still higher.

There could be no doubt that this tremendously increased national income was distributed widely. As late as 1947 almost a third of the nation's population had incomes below a \$3,000-a-year family annual level in terms of today's purchasing power. In 1962 less than one fifth of the population had incomes below that level. Plainly a considerable section of the people had climbed the economic ladder from penury to good living.

But there was an American consensus that *no one* should starve in a land of plenty. It was widely believed that federal aid should be given to the needy within the United States just as it had been given to those in foreign countries. Direct relief for the poor had obviously been necessary during the depression of the 1930's, and for many it was still necessary. To those who studied the problem, however, it seemed clear that alleviation of distress was not enough. Greater emphasis had to be placed on prevention, rehabilitation, and economic opportunity if an ugly and disheartening progression—poverty breeding poverty—was to be ended.

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