

Howard Phillips, Again

Howard Phillips, who the White House put in charge of dismantling OEO until the courts had to dismantle Mr. Phillips' authority because he held his job illegally, continues to speak candidly about his old agency. The other day Mr. Phillips looked back on some of his battles in which he led the troops for a brief spell.

He still insists on referring to the poverty programs as "the many OEO boondoggles to liberals." This is rousing phrasemaking perhaps, but it is a few miles wide of the facts. OEO programs were not "boondoggles." Each was answerable to congressional scrutiny and most had wide support across the country. The American Bar Association solidly supported Legal Services, mayors and governors backed community action agencies, labor unions backed Job Corps, educators endorsed Head Start and Upward Bound, the senior citizen lobby wanted more money, not less, for Foster Grandparents. If these programs were the failures Mr. Phillips suggests they were, why did so many non-political groups support them and why has the Nixon administration taken most of them into HEW, HUD and the Labor Department?

As for Mr. Phillips' remarks about "liberals," still another insult is given the poor. Hunger, joblessness, illiteracy and other miseries are not ideological. The best of the nation's politicians, whether in the tradition of American conservatism or liberalism, see human suffering in terms of moral values, not political beliefs. To pit himself in a mock battle against liberals suggests that Mr. Phillips lives in a world of his own, not the real one where serious citizens believe, on this question, that the enemy is poverty, not the other party.

In passing, Mr. Phillips did make one useful comment—that the administration still plans to do in OEO. It will be, he said, more a "slow strangulation" (perhaps letting it "twist slowly, slowly in the wind"?) than a direct killing, as premeditated when Mr. Phillips was given his hatchet. If such speculation is true, then once again Congress should take note. It has the power—legislatively—to decide OEO's fate, a decision that won't be forthcoming until next June 30. If OEO's old allies can be rallied—now that poverty is no longer a fashionable issue—then the agency will have survived another siege.