

Dog Food Isn't Yummy

By Michael Harrington

Ten years ago this month, the Economic Opportunity Act, which was to be the first salvo in an "unconditional" war on poverty, was enacted by Congress and signed into law by Lyndon B. Johnson.

It is, I know, bad form to speak of human misery during a national honeymoon, but the occasion demands it.

We now have a President who, with charm and decency, preaches the "old-time religion" of budget-balancing to which his predecessor was reconverted during his last days in power.

During Mr. Ford's first week in office, his Treasury Secretary, William E. Simon, went to Capitol Hill to proclaim that Mr. Johnson's "guns and butter" policy was the cause of the great inflation. Aside from being untrue—in the Vietnam era, Washington gave us many guns, no butter and a little oleo—it bodes ill for social spending in an Administration that is opposed to defense cuts.

So there is every reason to believe that Mr. Ford is honestly committed to the final phase of the Nixon economic policy: reduced domestic Federal spending, restrained consumer demand and higher profits to finance industrial expansion. If so, the second decade of the war on poverty begins with a surrender.

The signs of this outrageous trend were visible even before the Ford-Nixon policies. After years of Government figures on how poverty was on the wane, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs told us this year that hunger was more prevalent than ever in our economic underworld and that a significant fraction of our pet food was consumed by people.

And blacks, a disproportionate minority of the poor, who were sup-

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posed to be making incredible gains—one influential article in Commentary magazine conferred middle-class citizenship on most of them—were just reported by the Census Bureau to be receiving a declining percentage of the white wage as compared with the percentage in the nineteen-sixties.

Why these ominous reversals? Do they prove, as the reactionaries' favorite scripture says, that the poor will always be among us?

Not in the least. They simply demonstrate the consequences of continuing neglect and economic mismanagement. This would come as a shock to most Americans, who were persuaded by Mr. Nixon that we "threw money at problems" during the last decade and that the undeserving poor did not respond to our generosity (or rather, that they were corrupted by it). The truth was much more accurately stated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The Great Society programs, he said, were "oversold and underfinanced" to the point that their failure was almost a matter of design.

Another reason for national indifference has to do with the phonest of all social victories. The Nixon Administration abolished poverty a few years ago—from the Federal lexicon. It preferred to speak of "low income." To talk of the poor in the richest country in history is to suggest an intolerable condition that demands an urgent moral and political response; to speak of the "low-income population" is to refer to a statistic whose impersonality need not trouble anyone's conscience.

Moreover, the statistics themselves helped turn our backs on misery by understating its existence. The "low-income" line, for instance, is based on a minimal food budget, corrected for inflationary changes. But its basic definition of adequacy dates back to 1964 and it assumes a relationship between food and total budget that was reported in the Eisenhower years.

Thus, the standard is, in some measure, at least a decade out of date, a fact which does not concern the Government computers but which

the poor know, quite literally, in their guts.

It is, however, not simply a faulty Federal perception of reality that invites the nation to callousness; the reality itself helps punish the poor. During the Kennedy and Johnson years, for all the things that were not done, the steady reduction of unemployment did more to liberate people from poverty than any other program, with the possible exception of social security increases and Medicare, which had a profound impact upon the aging. Then the chronic unemployment and raging inflation of the Nixon years destroyed that modest, but hopeful, beginning.

The game plan of 1969 to 1971 openly proposed to buy price stability by increasing joblessness. The working and "near"-poor, who live on the brink, were pushed over. In 1968, a "good" year, almost as many people were pushed back down into poverty as escaped from it; in 1970-71 the Nixon Administration, by its own figures, increased poverty in America.

The poor are suffering from inflation more than anyone else, which has a lot to do with the human consumption of dog food. The prices of staples have risen more than anything else, and the other America is now in competition with the working class for cheap meals. But the poor pay more of their budget for food than anyone else. This evil, like unemployment, afflicts those least able to defend themselves from it.

And so, ten years after the war on poverty was declared, poverty has once more seized the initiative. What is worse, in a bewildered and even frightened nation where almost everyone feels so abused by inflation that they are concerned primarily for themselves, few people care.

But the fight will go on—perhaps we can begin it anew on Jan. 20, 1977—and we must remember that our unconscionable situation is not a tragedy imposed upon us by an implacable fate. It is a crime of our own choosing and, for that very reason, a crime that we can once again decide to stop committing.