



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community Action

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

The fight against poverty requires more than resources and goodwill: It necessitates a fundamental understanding of the causes of poverty and sound policies

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Today, the lines are blurring between the middle class, the working poor, and those unable to find work. The housing crisis, the lengthy recession, wage stagnation and a “recovery” in which the well-paying jobs that evaporated have been replaced by low-wage, contingent jobs, have led to more Americans slipping down the rungs of the economic ladder.

– Randi Weingarten

We can choose either to perpetuate “blame the victim” anti-poor policies of the past or to fight for the massive job training and full employment programs that Michael Harrington advocated but were never adopted.

– Joseph Schwartz

Poverty is a horrible, bedeviling force that invades and infects every aspect of our lives and communities – our homes, our pantries, our schools, our careers, and our health...Worse yet, what was once a war on poverty has become a war on the poor.

– Wes Moore

If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.

– Charles Darwin

Wes Moore came to national attention in 2010 with his extraordinary bestselling book *The Other Wes Moore*.

It chronicles the journey of both his own life and that of another young man who was born the same year, grew up in the same impoverished Baltimore neighborhood under remarkably similar conditions, and shares the same name. Today, “the other” Wes Moore is serving a life sentence in a Maryland maximum security prison, while the author of the book went on to become a Rhodes Scholar, a decorated combat veteran, and a White House Fellow.

The author Wes Moore notes that “The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his.” Through several twists of fate, and as Moore admits, to some degree luck, he was able to escape the realities that helped land his namesake behind bars. Yet again, Moore realizes that his fate is an exception rather than the rule.

This past June, the 38-year-old Moore was named Chief Executive Officer of the New York City-based Robin Hood Foundation, an anti-poverty organization that seeks to fund education, employment, housing and healthcare, and other initiatives in low-income communities. Shortly after joining the Robin Hood Foundation, Moore contributed a column to *Time* Magazine titled “The War on Poverty has Become a War on the Poor.” Now of course, Mr. Moore isn’t the first to use the phrase “war on the poor,” which almost dates back to President Johnson’s declaration of The War on Poverty itself.

This idea of the “war on the poor” has been the subject of several books, including three in the 1990s by authors Herbert Gans, Nancy Folbre, and Randy Albelda. More recently, the phrase has worked its way into the titles of articles by the *New York Times*, *Salon*,

The Nation, and BillMoyers.com. And one of the prevailing themes in these pieces, as well as Moore's editorial in *Time*, is that those in poverty do not suffer from a personal deficiency, but are victims of a history of policies that "put people into poverty and keep them there."

Again, this sentiment isn't new. One of the first major works to tackle this subject area was political scientist Michael Harrington's *The Other America*. In 1989, the year of Harrington's passing, historian Michael B. Katz advanced the discussion with *The Underserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*. Additional scholars and anti-poverty crusaders such as Peter Edelman, Barbara Ehrenreich, William Julius Wilson, Frances Fox Piven, and Jonathan Kozol continue to bring light to the trends, conditions, obstacles, and policies that foster cause and perpetuate poverty.

Now I realize I am repeating some of my thoughts from recent columns, but there is a truth that we must continue to proclaim. That truth is that poverty is not a character flaw, it is a math problem. Moore acknowledges the critical support of philanthropic

organizations and individual donors, as well as the "brave frontline soldiers" that help lift people out of poverty every day. But as he writes, "The chronic and systematic nature of poverty does not exist because there is not enough philanthropy; it exists as a direct result of failed policies. We must fight the war on poverty in a manner that reflects that great American spirit: with impatience, investment, and unwavering resolve."

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