

CHARLES BARTLETT

Poverty Program to Test Johnson's Intentions

The available insights indicate that President Johnson has been more than slightly surprised and discomfited by the election returns. Predictions are rife within the bureaucracy that he will "hunker up" and play a more cautious lead for the next two years.

Johnson has conjectured to associates that they all may have erred in bragging excessively about their legislative triumphs. He talked even before the election of being

finished with the Great Society because its legislative foundations had been enacted.

Such hints of an intention to embark on a new tack of leadership are bolstered by polls, which show that a significant segment of the voters, about 48 percent in one Republican survey, would prefer him to be more conservative. A much smaller group, 19 percent in the Republican poll, wants a more liberal President.

One crucial test of the President's direction will be the anti-poverty program, which is certain to founder in the next Congress unless he wraps a strong, protective arm around it. Johnson applied the Gavin plan to the war against poverty at the same time that he rejected it for the war in South Viet Nam. The domestic war has been a holding operation and its enclaves are on the verge of being overrun.

The tentative guidelines on which the Budget Bureau has shaped its hearings foreshadow no significant change in next year's poverty package. The total appropriation will be approximately the same and the Office of Economic Opportunity will not be stripped of any of its programs, as the Republicans proposed last spring.

But this in itself is not enough to save a program so close to being destroyed by its enemies. The poverty warriors have been left almost defenseless by the President's failure to translate the enthusiasm with which he declared war on poverty in 1964 into the funds and support needed to sustain an offensive.

Johnson did almost nothing to help Sargent Shriver and

his associates in the past Congress and he may well intend to let them be devoured by the next Congress. The blood will not be on his hands but he will be rid of a Pandora's box of embarrassments.

The President may have underestimated the implications of his promise to stamp out poverty in 1964. He probably did not realize that he was launching a social revolution that would cause old-line social workers, bureaucrats, mayors, governors, senators, congressmen and the poor themselves to rise up in noisy, intermittent indignation. As an old New Dealer who likes programs that kindle gratitude, Johnson may well be mystified by a welfare program capable of causing so much dissent.

The troubles arise because Shriver and his cohorts have unflinchingly declared war against all the forces which submerge the poor. Convinced that this was more than a matter of putting federal money in poor men's hands, they have poked their way deep into the subterranean caverns of the social structure, roused all kinds of bats, and raised new questions.

Johnson undoubtedly envisioned something more like the Labor Department's Neighborhood Youth Corps, which is a simple, almost a leaf-raking type of program that funnels more than one-quarter of a billion dollars into kids' pockets without teaching them much or raising many

issues. It is a safe, unimaginative welfare program and it is extremely popular with Congress.

The war on poverty will settle into this comfortable pattern if Congress abolishes the OEO. The bureaucrats know the New Deal techniques well and they will back away from contentions like the current one that sandwiches Shriver between the liberals who advocate sterilization and the Catholics who oppose birth control.

George Bernard Shaw wrote that "nothing is ever done in this world until men are prepared to kill one another if it is not done." The kind of all-out war that the President declared and Shriver has waged may involve too many basic changes to be accomplished in a tepid political climate.

But Pandora's box has been opened. "The rich man thinks of the future," according to an old proverb, "but the poor man thinks of today." Johnson has raised hopes that are unlikely to subside because of a conservative tinge in the election returns.

© 1966