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"Perhaps a Juvenile Delinquent or a Revolutionary": Robert Kennedy and Liberalism

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“Perhaps a Juvenile Delinquent of a Revolutionary”: Robert Kennedy and Liberalism

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Abstract

Robert Kennedy's transformation from a conservative investigator to a liberal politician is a political legend. Kennedy started his career investigating corruption in labor unions—a bastion of liberal support. His career, and life, ended while campaigning for president as a champion of the poor and opponent of injustice. His brother President John Kennedy's assassination is often cited as the origin of Robert Kennedy's transformation. By examining Robert Kennedy's anti-juvenile delinquency efforts, this project demonstrates that his commitment to fighting poverty started as Attorney General and before his brother's death. I also show how Robert Kennedy's insistence on local solutions to juvenile delinquency differed from the solutions offered by other liberals. I use congressional testimony, his books, and archival sources from John F. Kennedy Presidential Library to examine Robert Kennedy's views on juvenile delinquency and poverty. This research challenges the dominant narrative that Kennedy's political reorientation was solely sparked by the death of his brother President Kennedy. It also highlights an often under discussed topic—how Kennedy differed from other liberals of his time.

Executive Summary

Robert Kennedy was assassinated shortly after winning the 1968 California Democratic primary, and this tragic end has romanticized his political career. His campaign was the cultivation of his evolution from a conservative to a liberal. Kennedy focused his presidential campaign around fighting for the poor and fighting against injustice. It stood in contrast to how he started his career—working for Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy to identify accused communists in the government. The death of President John Kennedy, his brother, is often cited as the source of his transformation. However, Robert Kennedy became interested in the issues that he campaigned on in 1968 earlier in his career as Attorney General. So, is this common narrative of JFK's death as the catalysis to his transformation correct?

To examine this question, I focus on Robert Kennedy's anti-juvenile delinquency efforts as Attorney General. I contend that his transformation into a liberal began here. He made the connection between crime and poverty, and it laid the foundation for his passion to fight poverty and injustice. I also focus on how Kennedy's anti-juvenile delinquency efforts reveal that he had different views on crime and poverty than that of other liberals. To examine how Kennedy differed from other liberals at his time, I look at theories about the causes and solutions to poverty and juvenile delinquency. I compare Kennedy's ideas on the causes and solution on poverty and juvenile delinquency to that of other liberals. I find that Kennedy believed juvenile delinquency occurred when a community was too disorganized to prevent crime, and that solutions to juvenile delinquency should be geared towards communities. Other liberals remained focused on solutions that targeted the individual, however.

This work is built on both primary and archival research. I use three books written by Kennedy and some of his testimonies before Congress to ground my claims about his political

beliefs. My visit to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library was essential in gathering information about the origins of community action—the theory that Kennedy embraced to fight juvenile delinquency.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When asked what he would be if not a Kennedy, Robert Kennedy responded, "Perhaps a juvenile delinquent or a revolutionary."[1] Robert Kennedy was a politician with an incredible amount of empathy. He connected with people who had experiences he never did. During a car ride to Capitol Hill with noted juvenile delinquency scholar Lloyd Ohlin, Robert Kennedy remarked, "Oh, I see...If I had grown up in these circumstances, this could have happened to me."[2] This empathy allowed him to take an interest in something he had never experienced: juvenile delinquency.

Much has been written about Robert Kennedy's political reorientation. A majority of these works identified President Kennedy's death as the source of Robert Kennedy's transformation.[3] For example, *The Revolution of Bobby Kennedy: From Power to Protest After JFK* by John Bohrer details RFK's life from November 1963 to June 1966. Bohrer identifies RFK's transformation as driven by the need to carry out JFK's legacy.[4] Bohrer, however, takes little note of the impact of RFK's years as Attorney General. Larry Tye in his book *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon* traces how RFK went from the "Bad Bobby"—that

[1] Jack Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir* (New York: E.P. Button & Co, 1969), 18.
[2] Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: A.A. Knopf), 129.
[3] I will refer to Robert Kennedy as RFK and President Kennedy as JFK to avoid confusion.
[4] John Bohrer, *The Revolution of Robert Kennedy* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2017), 1.

worked for Senator Joseph McCarthy and wiretapped Martin Luther King Jr.—to the "Good Bobby"—who campaigned in 1968 as a champion of the underrepresented.[5]

Jules Feiffer, a political cartoonist, penned a cartoon titled "The Bobby Twins": these twins were Bad Bobby and Good Bobby.[6] The term "Bad Bobby" was not unfounded. RFK was often called ruthless, and historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. locates the origin of this term in JFK's 1956 congressional campaign.[7] RFK was the "enforcer" of the campaign and was "extremely demanding."[8] In 1953, RFK began working for Joseph McCarthy. His work for this Republican senator who incited fears about communist subversion of the American government was enough for some to label him a conservative. The term "Bad Bobby" was also associated with RFK's conservative beliefs he had in his early career. RFK was in fact a Cold War warrior—according to Jack Newfield, a journalist who covered RFK most of his career—who believed in a "narrow conservatism."[9] "Bad Bobby" appeared again during his participation on the Rackets Committee, which investigated corruption in labor unions. RFK saw in Jimmy Hoffa, a target of the investigation, an absolute evilness.[10] As Attorney General, RFK approved wiretaps on Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s phones. But, the "Good Bobby" also used his position as Attorney General to address civil rights and poverty. He helped ensured that James Meredith would be the first black man to enroll at Ole Miss. Along with his childhood friend David Hackett, RFK addressed the growing problem of juvenile delinquency.

Too often, RFK is split into two: before and after JFK's death. Certainly, JFK's death had a profound impact on RFK personally and politically. It took RFK months to recover from the

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[5] Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York: Random House, 2016).
[6] Description of the cartoon found Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 26.
[7] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 95.
[8] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 62.
[9] Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir*, 29.
[10] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 81.

loss of his brother: he often strolled alone around Washington D.C.'s streets and slouched at his desk for hours, staring out the window. The assassination removed the center of RFK's world: his brother. RFK had spent most of his adult life helping his brother: he helped campaign for JFK's first congressional race and his senate campaign, and he ran JFK's presidential campaign, then acted as one of his closest advisors in White House. After JFK's death, RFK, for the first time in his life, was on his own. He was "thrust into the sunlight" and now had to "think for the first time in his life, what he wanted to do, and what he stood for."[11]

Larry Tye traces RFK's political transformation from a conservative Democrat to a liberal icon. He makes mention of the impact his time as Attorney General made on him; however, Tye does not often discuss how RFK differed from mainstream liberals. I challenge the name liberal icon, because RFK was a different kind of liberal. In his political career, RFK "became of new kind of liberal, leaping over the old liberalism he thought was obsolete, dogmatic, passive, and fratricidal."[12] Edward Schmitt in *President of the Other America: Robert Kennedy and the Politics of Poverty* also contends that RFK's leftward shift was more of an evolution and that his time as Attorney General was essential this evolution. My work builds off this idea and offers a more in-depth comparison of RFK's policies and those of mainstream liberals.

Historians have focused on RFK's breaks with liberalism during his opposition to the Vietnam War and his presidential campaign, but I show that he differed significantly from mainstream liberalism from the beginning of his political career. I use Sidney Milkis and Jerome Mileur's work *The Great Society and The High Tide of Liberalism* to define mainstream

[11] Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir*, 29.
[12] Ibid, 19.

liberalism.[13] They describe the liberalism of the 1960s as being shaped by the New Deal and by anti-communist. The New Deal installed a faith in an "executive-centered" state that was "grounded on the notion of an economic bill of rights that vastly expanded the positive role of government in attending to the material needs of the nation at home."[14] Liberal foreign policy after World War II "embraced a determined anti-communism."[15] RFK believed in both attending to the needs of the people and in anti-communism; however but he differed in solutions to poverty and juvenile delinquency.

I focus on juvenile delinquency because it was the key to RFK's interest in poverty. During his time as Attorney General, RFK began to make the connections between crime and poverty. Poverty would become his issue as a senator and presidential candidate. Also, I focus on juvenile delinquency because it shows that RFK had differences between mainstream liberals from the beginnings of his political career. I look at what mainstream liberals thought to be the causes of poverty and juvenile delinquency and compare that to RFK. I also compare mainstream liberals' and RFK's solutions to juvenile delinquency. I use President Lyndon Johnson and the War on Poverty to compare to RFK. For RFK's thoughts on causes and solutions, I look at congressional testimonies, his writings, and archival sources from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

I aim to prove that RFK's political transformation was not so much a transformation, or a revolution, as it was a gradual evolution. I locate the key to his shift in his anti-delinquency efforts as Attorney General, because that was when he had discovered, and identified, poverty as one of the biggest problems facing America. I also show how RFK was a different kind of

[13] Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, eds., *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).
[14] Ibid, xiii.
[15] Ibid.

liberal. He was influenced by the New Deal but rejected the bureaucratic world it created and preferred local, community based solutions.

I provide a brief overview of how RFK was influenced politically by the New Deal and Cold War in Chapter 2. It reveals some of the differences between him and mainstream liberals. In addition, I then detail how poverty became an issue for liberals in the early 1960s. In Chapter 3, I provide a brief overview of the theories in the 1950s on the causes of juvenile delinquency. I then contrast that with the theories RFK embraced. These theories were put into action by the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency during the Kennedy Administration. This committee would develop the idea of community action to fight poverty, and reflected many of RFK's political preferences. I start Chapter 4 by discussing the differences between RFK and President Johnson because their differences had an effect on anti-juvenile delinquency and anti-poverty efforts. I then trace community action's place in War on Poverty planning to highlight the ideological differences between RFK and President Johnson. I end with RFK's resignation as Attorney General. His shift to the champion of the underrepresented was not yet complete, but he was on his way to becoming one of the most storied politicians of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2

Liberalism and Poverty

The liberalism of the late 1950s and the early 1960s was shaped by the Cold War and the New Deal. Both had an influence as to how liberals thought about poverty. RFK was also shaped by the New Deal and the Cold War, but he came to different conclusions about the causes and solutions of poverty and juvenile delinquency.

The Cold War Consensus

The major aspect of the Cold War consensus was anticommunism and an aim to preserve the democracy in the United States from both the far right and far left. In other words, the Cold War was "a holy crusade" led by Cold War warriors—liberals and conservatives—who became "stanch defenders of the American way of life."[16] RFK was certainly a Cold War warrior. He worked for the Senator Joseph McCarthy, on the Investigations Subcommittee, who incited fears of communist subversion when McCarthy claimed there were communists in the State Department. RFK would later say "…at the time, I thought there was a serious internal security threat to the United States…and Joe McCarthy seemed to be the only one who was doing anything about it."[17] RFK only worked for McCarthy for a short—from December 1952 to July 1953. RFK left the subcommittee because of disagreements with Roy Cohn, McCarthy's number

[16] Allen J. Matusow. *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 377.
[17] Quoted in Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life,* 64.

two, about investigative style and methods.[18] However, RFK "never lost his fondness for McCarthy"[19] and he attended the senator's funeral in 1957.[20]

In 1955, RFK rejoined the Investigations Subcommittee as chief counsel. Democratic Senator John McClellan replaced McCarthy as chair of the committee because the Democrats gained a majority of Congress in the 1954 election. As majority chief counsel RFK had the power to set the agenda for the committee. He steered the committee towards investigating labor unions, but RFK made it clear to a reporter that the committee was not a "whit less interested in rooting Communists out of government than it was when Senator Joseph McCarthy ran the show."[21] His investigations of labor rackets revealed that he identified the threats to America as more than just communism. RFK hoped the committee would get back to looking into waste, fraud, corruption and mismanagement within the government.[22] This focus suggests that he saw waste, fraud, corruption and mismanagement, in addition to communism, as a threat to the United States.

On January 31, 1957, the Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field, better known as the Rackets Committee, was formed.[23] RFK had an integral role in its formation. In August 1956, RFK asked Senator McClellan to authorize a preliminary check into labor racketing.[24] McClellan authorized it and RFK embarked on a trip to various Teamster chapters in Los Angeles and Seattle. By Christmas RFK had convinced AFL-CIO president George Meany to agree to an investigation. The Senate then established the Rackets

[18] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Time*, 105.
[19] Ibid, 106.
[20] Tye, *Bobby Kennedy*, 3.
[21] Quoted in Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 116.
[22] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* 116; Tye, *Bobby Kennedy,* 55.
[23] Tye, *Bobby Kennedy,* 76.
[24] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 138.

Committee by selecting four members from the Investigations Subcommittee and four from the Labor Committee.[25]

RFK wrote a book in 1960 titled *The Enemies Within* about his experiences on the Rackets Committee. This phrase was often used during this period to refer to communist subversion.[26] However, RFK saw organized crime and corruption as the enemy within. The corruption, according to RFK, was symptomatic of a larger moral issue: "The sordid dishonesty uncovered by the McClellan Committee [the Rackets Committee] is a reflection on all Americans, for it cuts across all segments our economic life—labor, management, the law, the press."[27] For RFK, organized corruption was a symptom of a more serious "moral illness."[28] This moral illness, not communism or corruption alone, were the real dangers to America.

A consequence of the Cold War consensus was tempering of the optimism of liberalism. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued why liberals had to be cautious in his book *The Vital Center*, published 1949:

> The degeneration of the Soviet Union taught us a useful lesson, however. It broke the bubble of the false optimism of the nineteenth century. Official liberalism had long been almost inextricably identified with a picture of man as perfectible, as endowed with sufficient wisdom and selflessness to endure power and to use it infallibly for the general good. The Soviet experience, on top of the rise of fascism, reminded my generation rather forcibly that man was, indeed, imperfect, and that the corruptions of power could unleash great evil in the world. We discovered a new dimension of experience - the dimension of anxiety, guilt and corruption.[29]

Daniel Bell, a prominent sociologist of the post-war era, expanded on this argument when he declared an end to ideology in his book *The End of Ideology: on the Exhaustion of Political*

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[25] Ibid, 143.
[26] Schlesinger, 190.
[27] Robert F. Kennedy, *The Enemy Within* (New York: Harper, 1960), 232.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co,. 1949), viii-ix.

Ideas in the Fifties published in 1960. His basic argument was that after World War II both political extremes, on the right and on the left, were discredited because of the rise of fascism and communism that occurred in Europe. According to Bell, this led to an "exhaustion of political ideas" because conservatives and liberals steered away from political extremes and back towards the political center.[30] Therefore, liberals and conservatives were similar on political issues. On the left, it led to a tempering of the optimism that characterized liberalism during the New Deal.

RFK did not like this lack of optimism; he believed it led to a lack of real progress. JFK would later say of his brother, "He might once have been intolerant of liberals as such because his early experience was with that high-minded, high speaking kind who never got anything done."[31] This commitment to change is seen in his, and JFK's, belief in a new generation with a unique responsibility. RFK defined this generation as the generation "which was born in the First World War and raised in depression; which fought in the Second World War and launched its public career in the age of space."[32] Both RFK and JFK belonged to this generation. This generation, again according to RFK, was "determined to do everything they could to spare the world another such catastrophe [referring to World War II]—and to lay the foundations for peace and social progress."[33] In fact, this generation had the "conferred responsibility" to lay those foundations. This has a hint of the Cold War consensus belief in preserving the American way of life by avoiding the catastrophe of communism and fascism; therefore, RFK was not completely unaffected by the Cold War consensus.

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[30] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York: Free Press, 1967).
[31] Quoted in Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Time*, 191.
[32] Robert Kennedy, "The Goals of Government" (speech, Nihon University, Tokyo, Japan, February 6, 1962).
[33] Ibid.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who's *The Vital Center* was the manifesto of postwar liberalism, echoed this belief in a new generation that had a responsibility to enact change. Schlesinger also defined this new generation as growing up watching Franklin Roosevelt and experiencing the horrors of the Second World War. The liberalism of this generation described by Schlesinger "had a positive and confident ring. It has stood for responsibility and for achievement."[34] Both RFK's and Schlesinger's definition of this new generation included the responsibility to create change. However, the mainstream liberalism that Schlesinger represented had different ideas on how to bring about change—especially in regard to curing poverty.

The New Deal Legacy

The New Deal influenced the economic policies of liberals in the 1960s. According to historian Barton Bernstein, during the immediate post war period and into the early 1960s, the New Deal was considered a success because it was a "replenishment of democracy, the rescuing of the federal government from the clutches of big business, the significant redistribution of political power."[35] With the prosperity after the war, it appeared like capitalism was saved and strengthened.[36] According to economists like John Kenneth Galbraith, the major problem of capitalism, the boom and bust cycle, could be avoided. Galbraith argued that government officials knew enough about the economics of capitalism—because the New Deal had successfully saved it—that it could prevent another bust and that there were opportunities for the

[34] Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, vii.
[35] Barton Bernstein, *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 264.
[36] Ibid.

government to stimulate the economy.[37] This belief in the ability of the government to intervene in the economy was central to Kennedy administration economic policies.

Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisors believed the government could use fiscal policies to create economic growth.[38] The Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) was created in 1946 to bring the best available economic knowledge to the president. Since JFK did not have any concrete economic policies he committed to during the 1960 campaign, he often brought in the CEA for advice.[39] Kennedy's CEA held Keynesian beliefs: it encouraged government involvement in the economy. However, it relied on fiscal tools like tax cuts to stimulate the economy instead of public spending.[40] The goal was to increase economic growth with the belief that economic growth would create more wealth; therefore, lifting people out of poverty.

In contrast, the Eisenhower administration's main economic goals were to prevent and control inflation and therefore would not create a deficit by cutting taxes.[41] It appeared that this approach was not successful because there were four minor recessions during the Eisenhower administration, and by the time JFK was inaugurated, unemployment was the highest in the post-war era.[42] Therefore, Kennedy's CEA, headed by economist Walter Heller, suggested that Kennedy propose a tax cut. By 1965 it appeared that the tax cuts achieved the goal of creating economic growth: GNP had risen by $25 million by September of 1965.[43] This form of

[37] John Kenneth Galbraith, *American Capitalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 199-200. Galbraith himself was a liberal who believed in Keynesian economics.
[38] Judith Russell, *Economics, Bureaucracy, and Race: How Keynesians Misguided the War on Poverty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 19.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid, 23.
[41] James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution), 34.
[42] Ibid, 23.
[43] Ibid.

Keynesian economics embraced by the CEA was labeled the New Economics. It was not embraced by all in the Kennedy administration, however.

Some in the Department of Labor favored a structuralist approach.[44] Structuralists believed that the problems in the labor market could not be fixed by fiscal tools, like tax cuts, alone. According to Sundquist, a Brookings Institution scholar of politics and public policy in the 1960s, structural unemployment is the residual unemployment—what remains after the cyclical unemployment and the frictional unemployment. Cyclical unemployment is the unemployment due to economic busts while frictional unemployment is the irreducible minimum of unemployment that cannot be eliminated. New Economics was based on the idea that the government could intervene in the economy to prevent busts, and that meant that the unemployment that resulted from cyclical unemployment was no more. So, unemployment policy should address the barriers that prevented people from being matched with jobs. Workers being pushed out because of automation, discrimination preventing African-Americans from being hired, and economically depressed areas where jobs had left were often identified as the barriers that kept people out of work.

Because there was no consensus in the Kennedy administration between the CEA's aggregate growth policy and the structuralists, JFK enacted policies that followed growth policy and addressed structural problems. Kennedy signed the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962. This program was meant for workers who had been displaced by automation: pushed out of jobs and into poverty. Also, discrimination was considered a barrier for workers to enter the workforce. The Kennedy administration addressed this issue at the federal level by issuing Executive Order 10925 in March 1961. The order set up a federal government wide effort

[44] Russell, *Economics, Bureaucracy, and Race*, 18.

to report recommendation son how to end discrimination in federal employment, and it also required federal government contractors to ensure that applicants are considered without regard to race.[45] This order did not extend to state or local government or any form of private business; therefore, not effecting a large portion of African-Americans.

Another legacy of the New Deal was welfare. President Franklin Roosevelt, in his first hundred days, introduced welfare to the United States years and created a limited welfare state.[46] The welfare state became central to American politics—so much so that Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican, said "[s]hould any political party attempt to abolish social security unemployment insurance and eliminate labor laws and farm programs you would not hear of that party again in our political history."[47] Welfare was enshrined into liberal politics and was considered a legitimate function of government by conservatives.

However, RFK differed significantly from mainstream liberals in his views on welfare. RFK viewed welfare as "degrading, both to the giver and the recipient"[48] and was "suspicious of welfare because he thought it robbed the individual of self-respect and a place in the community."[49] In RFK's book *To Seek a Newer World*, a collection of essays from his experience as Attorney General and Senator, he offers his critique of the New Deal and welfare: "More important, the system of social welfare services we have provided for the poor consists of a series of handouts: a separate economy, almost a separate nation, a screen of government

[45] Exec. Order No. 10925, 3 C.F.R. (1961).
[46] William E. Leuchtenburg, *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 19.
[47] James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 272.
[48] Peter Edelman, *So Rich, So Poor: Why It's So Hard to End Poverty in America* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 85.
[49] Thurston Clarke, *The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and the 82 Days that Inspired America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), 80.

agencies keeping the poor apart from the rest of us."[50] This shows his suspicion of welfare and the federal bureaucracy and shows his preference for local solutions. RFK continues his critique that welfare is not the answer because it was instituted "without asking how to solve the problems that caused them to need assistance in the first."[51] This critique is the basis of why RFK preferred local solutions. Also, RFK believed that the cost of welfare was "a broken home and illegitimacy."[52] There were no federal programs for families where the father was working but not making enough, and a woman was more likely to qualify welfare if she was not married. Therefore, one of RFK's biggest reasons for criticizing welfare was because "welfare had created a cycle of dependency that is distasteful to giver and recipient alike."[53] Additionally, RFK was opposed to welfare because it "had never contained a serious jobs policy."[54]

The New Deal had created two types of aid: social security and assistance to narrow categories. Social Security provided temporary benefits for those out of work. The narrow categories were the indigent aged, blind, widowed with children. In other words, these narrow categories are those citizens who were not covered by social security "who were nonetheless deemed deserving of support."[55] Therefore, the legacy of the New Deal shaped how liberals thought about unemployment and how they would eventually think poverty. Unemployment was less and less associated with lack of jobs; instead, it was beginning to become associated with the inability of the poor to be matched with jobs.[56] This limited how liberals thought about poverty, because it appeared like the poverty that resulted from unemployment was not because of a

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[50] Robert F. Kennedy, *To Seek a Newer World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 28.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Kennedy, *To Seek a Newer World*, 32.
[53] Ibid, 33.
[54] Edelman, *So Rich, So Poor*, 85.
[55] Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 14.
[56] Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, 15.

defect in the economy—a lack of jobs—but because of a defect in the poor. Poverty was starting to be thought of in terms of cultural and psychological causes.

Rediscovery of Poverty

Poverty became an issue again in the early 1960s and it focused mostly on non-structural causes. Michael Harrington helped to ignite the interest of poverty. His landmark book *The Other America* reinforced the idea of both structural and non-structural sources of poverty. Harrington's claim of the number of people living in poverty was shocking. According to him, there were 40,000,000 to 50,000,000 citizens in the other America.[57] He did not detail how he came to these numbers and did not provide a notes section in the book, however. Nonetheless, people were shocked by this number. Harrington argued that the poor in America had become invisible.[58] One reason for the poor's invisibility, according to Harrington, was the geography of the American city. Because millions of Americans lived in suburbs, it was easy to avoid seeing the poverty in cities and "it [was] easy to assume that ours is, indeed, an affluent society."[59] Also, the poor were invisible because they were "unable to speak for themselves" and had no "lobbies of their own."[60]

Harrington introduces what he calls the New Poor. Different from this new categorization, the old poor were the poor that lived in extreme poverty and who had thought to be cured by the economic growth of the 1950s. According to Harrington, the new poor were "rejects of society."[61] This idea echoed what the Sparkman Committee of 1955 called "social

[57] Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962),3.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid, 5.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid, 11.

handicapping." The Sparkman Committee called those out of the labor force handicapped. This congressional subcommittee was headed by Alabama democrat John Sparkman. The committee introduced the idea of social handicapping. Those with social handicaps where left behind in the economic growth that occurred after World War II. Age, race, or region were factors in missing out in the economy growth: older Americans were physically unable to work, African-Americans were denied from jobs because of discrimination, and regions were industries had left had few remaining jobs. The committee also brought attention to the problem of low wages. The committee reported that millions of minimum wage working families were not poor one year but were poor in the next.[62] Therefore, poverty statistics were not offering a full picture of poverty in America. Overall, the Sparkman Committee was concerned with structural causes of poverty.[63]

Harrington also acknowledged structural poverty. He recognized that region could be an economic disadvantaged. He recounts that the new poor saw the rest of America move ahead but these poor "went on living in depressed areas."[64] While this acknowledged that economic growth did not touch everyone equally, Harrington also included psychological reasons to explain poverty. These new poor in "depressed areas" often "tended to become depressed human beings" who do not move away to look for new opportunities.[65] Harrington's discussion of the culture of poverty pushed the national conversation towards the psychological and cultural explanations of poverty.

Harrington spent much of the book talking about the links between poverty and social handicaps. He used the culture of poverty to explain these links. The New Poor were not in the

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[62] Ten-year Record of the Select Committee on Small Business, U.S. Senate, 1950-1960. Statement by Sen. John Sparkman, and List of Committee Publications for the 81st Congress, 2d Session through 86th Congress, 1st Session, 1960.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Harrington, *The Other America*, 20.
[65] Ibid, 110.

extremes of poverty; however, they were still "maimed in body and spirit, existing at levels beneath those necessary for human decency".[66] He continued with psychological explanations: "this poverty twists and deforms the spirit. The American poor are pessimistic and defeated, and they are victimized by mental suffering to a degree unknown in suburbia".[67] Therefore, the American poor lived in a different mental world. Additionally, Harrington uses cultural explanations to explain the culture of poverty. The urban poor was no longer characterized by ethnic groups: they had moved into the suburbs. The people now "in the slums...were not slum dwellers."[68] These new "slum dwellers" were predominately African Americans moving into cities. All in all, the culture of poverty had a board appeal because it blamed no one and explained why the poor could not lift themselves up from their bootstraps.[69] It did not blame the system of capitalism that Democrats began to defend after World War II. The oppressive culture of poverty explained why the welfare given by Democrats for over twenty years had eliminated poverty. The culture of poverty was greeted as an important scientific idea and for this reason, policy makers started to focus on things other than economic because the culture of poverty was based on psychology and culture.[70]

The Other America was published in 1962. The book was read by JFK, and it might have inspired him to declare that poverty would be the central piece of his 1964 legislation. However, it is unknown just how much *The Other America* effected JFK. He had seen poverty when he campaigned in Boston for Congress in 1948 and had seen it again in West Virginia when he

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[66] Ibid, 4.
[67] Harrington, *The Other America*, 10.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Frank Stricker, *Why America Lost the War on Poverty—And How to Win It* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 46.
[70] Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 121.

campaigned for president. These experiences did not transform his "political passions" like it did for RFK.[71] However, according to their brother Edward Kennedy, "Bobby was most stirred by Michael Harrington."[72] One explanation for this is the degree of devotion for the two brothers. Harrington was also a Catholic and this fact likely attracted the Kennedys to his book. However, RFK's "stern Catholicism" contrasted with JFK's "easy observance."[73] While growing up, RFK was much closer to his mother, who was the more devout of his parents. JFK was reared by his less devout father who prepared him for public life. Therefore, RFK probably saw the underlying Catholic sentiments in *The Other America* while JFK did not. This is perhaps why the book had a more profound impact on RFK.

RFK was shaped by the New Deal and the Cold War but in different ways. RFK did hold some of the beliefs of the Cold War consensus: he believed communism was a threat to the United States. However, in his time as Attorney General he would find a new enemy within—poverty. The New Deal shaped how many liberals thought about poverty, and many ideas about poverty in the early 1960s relied on psychological and cultural explanations. This shift in explanations about poverty was mirrored in theories about the causes of juvenile delinquency. RFK came to different conclusions about the causes of juvenile delinquency, however.

[71] David Burner and Thomas R. West, *The Torch is Passed: The Kennedy Brothers and American Liberalism* (New York Atheneum, 1984), 210.
[72] Edward M. Kennedy, *True Compass: A Memoir* (New York: Hackette Book Group, 2009), 229.
[73] Ibid, 193.

Chapter 3

Juvenile Delinquency

Juvenile delinquency was the key to RFK's transformation from the "ruthless" investigator to a champion of the underrepresented. RFK identified organized crime and corruption as one of the main threats to America during his time on the Rackets Committee, but as Attorney General, RFK began to see juvenile delinquency as an outgrowth of the organized crime he had investigated. In his book *The Pursuit of Justice*, which was published after his time as Attorney General, RFK said the anti-delinquency efforts of the Kennedy administration were a "war against the corruption of the youth."[74] By the end of his time as Attorney General, RFK saw poverty the same as organized and crime—as "evil." [75] During his time as Attorney General, his "driven moralism, once preoccupied with anticommunism and racket busting" found new causes in juvenile delinquency and poverty.[76]

By the time RFK became Attorney General, juvenile delinquency was one of the few social problems that gathered widespread concern, [77] and RFK identified "delinquency and crime" as "among the most serious problems facing the American people."[78] Juvenile delinquency was considered a national epidemic after World War II, and J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, helped promote this idea. Each year after the war

[74] Robert F. Kennedy, edited by Theodore J. Lowi. *The Pursuit of Justice*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), 11 and 23.
[75] Ibid, 11.
[76] Burner, *The Torch is Passed,* 111.
[77] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 107.
[78] "Statement of the Honorable Robert F. Kennedy Before the General Subcommittee on Labor of the House Education and Labor Committee." June 28, 1961, 1.

the Justice Department published the *Uniform Crime Reports*, which presented higher numbers of juveniles committing crimes. It showed juvenile delinquency rates rising faster than population growth.[79] Hoover claimed that "youngsters between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, of both sexes, in all sections of the country, are still contributing heavily to the statistics which make our record of crime a national disgrace."[80] Hoover served to legitimize the idea of a crime wave because of his status as FBI director. Even though the actual statistics are unclear because of difficulties in gathering data, the new mass media spread the idea of a crime wave; therefore, "most Americans discovered delinquency in the press."[81]

Televised hearings on crime also served to create awareness about juvenile delinquency. Estes Kefauver, a Democratic senator from Tennessee, was interested in the link between media and crime. In particular, he was interested in the link between comic books and juvenile delinquency.[82] Televised hearings of the Crime Committee in 1950 attracted national attention. Hearings on juvenile delinquency in 1954 and 1956 also attracted national attention. Kefauver and other members of the Crime Committee attended the National Conference on Juvenile Delinquency, held in June 1954. The conference further served to bring additional national attention to juvenile delinquency.[83]

Interest in juvenile delinquency research was sparked by the supposed crime wave of youth crime. The common approach in the 1950s to thinking about the causes of juvenile delinquency was the psychiatric approach. The problem of juvenile delinquents was "assumed to

[79] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 116.
[80] Hoover, J. Edgar. "Juvenile Delinquency." Southwest Review 32, no. 4 (1947): 387.
[81] James B. Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 21.
[82] Ibid, 144.
[83] Ibid, 22.

be causally related to psychological" instead of "social variables."[84] In 1955, President Eisenhower addressed juvenile delinquency in a speech to Congress. He declared a new program of grants to states in order to "strengthen and improve" programs and services for the "prevention, diagnosis and treatment" of youth offenders.[85] Eisenhower's remarks on juvenile delinquency was part of a speech about health issues: Eisenhower embraced the psychiatric approach which used medical terminology to describe juvenile delinquency. These grants announced by Eisenhower were meant to improve services such as counseling and mentoring for delinquent youths. This is because the psychiatric approach focused on individual case work to solve delinquency.[86]

Juvenile delinquents, because they were deviant from the norm, came to be considered sick. They were sick because of family instability and personality maladjustment.[87] This interpretation ignored social issues that contribute to crime, such as poor schools, inadequate housing, and lack of jobs. The approach did not see poverty as a factor in juvenile delinquency. For Kefauver, comic books were a factor in causing crime among youth, and for conservatives like Eisenhower, delinquent behavior originated within the individual.[88] The blame on the individual and minimizing of social factors was a conservative view. According to this belief, there were few ways to institute structural reform because change was up to the individual. However, RFK did not embrace these theories in his anti-juvenile delinquency efforts.

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[84] Daniel Knapp and Kenneth Polk, *Scouting the War on Poverty: Social Reform Politics in the Kennedy Administration* (Lexington, MA.: Health Lexington Books, 1971), 58.
[85] President Eisenhower, "Address to Congress" (speech, Wash DC, January 31, 1955).
[86] Irving Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), 262.
[87] Knapp, *Scouting the War on Poverty*, 58.
[88] Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage*, 64.

Poverty, Community & Juvenile Delinquency

Along with the national attention on juvenile delinquency, RFK's sister Eunice encouraged him to take up the issue: Eunice had worked on juvenile delinquency in President Truman's Justice Department.[89] The Juvenile Delinquency Act of 1961 was the first federal act to focus directly on the problem of juvenile delinquency.[90] The act created the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency (PCJD), and it consisted of the Secretary of Labor and the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. RFK was appointed chairman and put David Hackett, his childhood friend and aide on the 1960 campaign, in charge of its day-to-day operations. Both men knew little about youth crime, but they were determined to learn more about the problem. RFK went on a forty-block tour through East Harlem and met with youth gang members.[91] RFK asked the youth what could be done about crime in their neighborhood, and the most common response was opportunity for work and places for recreation.[92] RFK also made regular visits to some of the District of Columbia's poorest neighborhoods.[93] He frequently made stops at schools and talked to students about what could be done to improve their neighborhoods.

These visits with poor youth were where RFK started to make the connection between crime and poverty. RFK explained the Justice Department's presence at the National Committee for Children and Youth Conference on Unemployed, Out of School Youth in Urban Areas by recounting that the majority of juvenile delinquency in detention facilities, which the Justice

[89] Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 68.
[90] Lloyd Ohlin, "The Future of Juvenile Justice Policy and Research," *Crime and Delinquency 44*, no. 1 (1985): 464.
[91] Edward R.Schmitt, *President of the Other America: Robert Kennedy and the Politics of Poverty* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 69.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid, 70.

Department oversaw, were out of work or school prior to their arrest.[94] In fact, RFK stated that: "The problem of delinquency today…is a problem of employment and education opportunities for preparation and achievement."[95] This was a different sentiment from the theories popular in the 1950s: these theories had focused on the individual as the cause of delinquency. Theories on juvenile delinquency in the 1960s shifted to focus on poverty as the cause and community involvement as the solution. These theories were well suited to RFK's ideology and became the basis for community action.

Like RFK, the Ford Foundation was starting to link poverty and juvenile delinquency. Under the leadership of Paul Ylvisaker, the foundation took an interest in urban problems starting in the late 1950s. It made grants to a "new corporation designed to coordinate all agencies in the community, public and private, whose activities impinged upon the poor."[96] The foundation became interested in what Ylvisaker called "gray areas": the areas in between commercial centers and the suburbs where urban new-comers lived. Therefore, Ylvisaker looked for a theory to put in practice that could work with existing gray area communities. He found the theory of community competence, which was developed by Leonard Cottrell, a sociologist who specialized in juvenile delinquency. Cottrell's work formed the basis of community action—which the PCJD would put into action.

Cottrell was the director of the Russell Sage Foundation and a leader in community competence theory. Cottrell laid out the theory in his book *Identity and Interpersonal Competence*.[97] According to this theory, disorganized communities could not use social control

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[94] "Address by Honorable Robert F. Kennedy." Prepared for Delivery at the National Committee for Children and Youth Conference on Unemployed, Out of School Youth in Urban Areas. Washington, D.C., May 24, 1961.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 123.
[97] Leonard Cottrell, *Identity and Interpersonal Competence: A New Direction in Family Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

to discourage delinquency behaviors and the result was the acceptance of delinquent behaviors. A community became disorganized when businesses left for residential areas and when urban newcomers moved in. The social and cultural background of urban newcomers—European immigrants and southern African Americans in particular—conflicted with urban life. All in all, juvenile delinquency occurred in urban areas when the community was too disorganized to function as an agent of social control. Cottrell stressed the importance of local leadership in reorganizing the community: the community must reorganize in a way that it can handle the problem of youth crime. Cottrell believed that local leaders should be nurtured and encouraged to take this responsibility. Since leadership also implies control, the control of the community must be local. Therefore, attempts to rebuild communities must come from within the community itself and be implemented by locals.[98]

RFK echoed the idea of community competence in his writings: "we see repeated evidence of family and community failures" in cities.[99] RFK believed that local solutions were the best way to address these failures. He stated that "the building of self-sufficiency and self-determination within the communities of poverty themselves is critical."[100] RFK saw the community as central in anti-juvenile delinquency efforts: rising delinquency rates could be solved with "modest efforts on the part of the community" but the entire community must be involved in the "war against the corruption of the youth."[101] In fact, he wrote that: "What is needed now is a systematized and intense effort to mobilize the resources of Federal, state and local governments and private agencies, schools and churches. The Federal Government ought to have a part in

[98] Cottrell, *Identity and Interpersonal Competence*, 30.
[99] Kennedy, *The Pursuit of Justice*, 25.
[100] Kennedy, *To Seek a Newer World*, 37.
[101] Kennedy, *The Pursuit of Justice*, 22-23.

such programs, although ultimately it is up to city, state and private agencies to carry most of the load."[102]

The purpose of the PCJD, according to RFK, was to coordinate "federal efforts to help local communities in the prevention of juvenile delinquency."[103] However, RFK and Hackett still were not sure how best to prevent juvenile delinquency. Therefore, Hackett sought out professionals in the field.

President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency in Action

Hackett called a conference on delinquency in early 1961 to educate himself on the leading theories.[104] Lloyd Ohlin's opportunity theory stood out to Hackett and he "became an unquestioning disciple of opportunity theory."[105] Lloyd Ohlin was influenced by the theories of Robert Merton. At a conference held by the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1955, Robert Merton presented his paper "Social-Cultural Environment and Anomie." It stated that delinquents grew up to fill the gap between the American ideology of success and the failure of many young people to achieve it.[106] Denied access to success, many young people adopted deviant behavior. This is a structural view because it suggested that the economy, and not the individual, is in the way of obtaining middle class values.

Lloyd Ohlin and his colleague Richard Cloward expanded on Merton's idea in their book, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*. Lloyd Ohlin was a student of

[102] Ibid, 23-24.
[103] Statement of the Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General of the United States Before the Subcommittee on Employment and Manpower of the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee on S, 2036 and S. 404. June 23, 1961.
[104] Irwin Unger, *The Best of Intentions: The Triumphs and Failures of the Great Society under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 60.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Excepts of Merton's paper in Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage,* 134.

Cottrell while at the University of Chicago. Ohlin would go on to teach at Columbia University, where he would work with his colleague Richard Cloward. Both believed in community competence: "[i]t is our view…that the major effort of those who wish to eliminate delinquency should be directed to the reorganization of slum communities."[107] This could be done by giving local leaders control over "institutions for the socialization of youth."[108] Therefore, Ohlin and Cloward believed in both community competence and the importance of local leadership, and looked at the disparity between general aspirations and individual failures.

The discrepancy between goals and opportunities caused juveniles to act out in delinquent ways. This became known as opportunity theory. According to Cloward and Ohlin, the inability to provide opportunities was the fault of the communities. Hence, juvenile delinquency was not an "individual pathology" but a "community pathology."[109] Accordingly, delinquency could be ended by changing the social setting and providing opportunities. This could be done by reorganizing the institutions within the community so it can handle its problems. Cottrell, Ohlin, and Cloward were products of the so-called "Chicago School." Sociologists at the University of Chicago started proposing juvenile delinquency theories in the 1920s. They disagreed with the psychiatric view, and believed that communities must restore a sense of social competence to slum dwellers so they could control their young.[110] RFK came to embrace the theories of Ohlin and Cloward: in an address to the National Committee for Children and Youth, RFK said that "when aspirations outstrip opportunities" it leads to crime, and prevention "requires a broad concentrated effort to narrow the gap between the legitimate

[107] Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs* (Glencoe, IL.: Free Press, 1960), 211.
[108] Ibid, 213.
[109] Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity*, 86.
[110] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 211.

aspirations of our deprive youths and the opportunities available to them."[111] This echoes the argument in Ohlin's *Delinquency and Opportunity*.[112]

In May 1962, PCJD received a $2.1 million federal grant to begin reviewing proposals for projects from sixteen different cities. [113] The first grant it made was to Mobilization for Youth (MFY). MFY was a non-profit corporation composed of representatives from agencies and institutions in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The Henry Street Settlement reached out to the National Institute of Mental Health for help in combating youth crime. At this time, around the late 1950s, the NIMH itself had started moving away from the psychiatric approach and towards Cottrell's community competence approach.[114] The NIMH recruited Ohlin and Cloward from Columbia University to write a proposal for a program to address juvenile delinquency. The finished proposal was released in December of 1961 and called MFY a "demonstration project to test the prevention and control of delinquency by expanding opportunities." Essentially, it was a program to test Ohlin and Cloward's opportunity theory. By the end of 1963, PCJD made seventeen grants for demonstration projects in sixteen cities and these demonstration projects were based on the MFY model.

Origins of Community Action

PCJD began "trying to bypass what they considered the dead hand of welfare bureaucracy."[115] By circumventing the social workers, the bureaucrats in welfare offices, and the

[111] Robert Kennedy, "Address by the Honorable Robert F. Kennedy Attorney General of the United States. Prepared for Delivery at the National Committee for Children and Youth Conference on Unemployed, Out of School Youth in Urban Areas," Wash DC, May 24, 1961.
[112] Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity,* 61.
[113] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 108.
[114] Unger, *The Best of Intentions*, 59.
[115] Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, 138.

city machine politicians, PCJD could "avoid becoming entangled in the Federal government's system of vested interest."[116] This left the question of who should be planning programs for the community. Because, according to RFK, existing programs "are always planned for the poor—not with the poor."[117] However, by 1963, it became clear that the programs being funded by the PCJD were not being planned by the poor.

Tensions became clear between the programs established by PCJD and the cities in which they were established became apparent in Cleveland, one of the first cities to receive funding from PCJD. According to former RFK Senate aide Peter Edelman, local politicians and institutions did not like that federal money was coming into their city and that the PCJD program was controlling it, not them.[118] In addition, many local officials saw delinquency as a separate problem distinct from poverty.[119] Cleveland was the first city to submit a proposal for funding. Once the federal money arrived, the Cleveland Action for Youth was stalled by politicians and public institutions.[120] The school superintendent replaced David Austin, the head of Cleveland Action for Youth, with a former school administrator in an attempt to gain control of the federal funds. This pattern was mirrored in other cities such as Philadelphia, Minneapolis, New Haven, and Boston.[121] Therefore, local officials were attempting to take control of the planning process away from the local communities. Increasing pressure was coming from Congress—Representative Edith Green in particular—about results from PCJD. Representative Green, a democrat from Oregon, disliked the PCJD's plans to fund a few demonstration projects in

[116] Robert Kennedy to Theodore Sorensen. Box 37, Sorensen Papers. JFK Library.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Edelman, *So Rich, So Poor*, 16.
[119] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 412.
[120] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 115.
[121] Ibid, 116.

various before attempting to bring about a national program.[122] Although, according to Hackett, "Bob Kennedy gave me complete responsibility for [PCJD] and we only asked him to do things we need his help on," RFK got personally involved in assuaging Green's worries.[123]

These tensions led the PCJD to reassess its model and resulted in the idea of community action.[124] The model based on opportunity theory was elitist because it relied on professionals to run the programs. These professionals were planning for the poor, not with the poor because, according to this view, the community was too disorganized to produce leaders. Opportunity theory believed that local leaders would grow into leadership roles, but that had yet to happen with MFY as professionals were still running most of the programs. Additionally, these professional reformers aimed to use these communities to spur wanted social change.[125] Leonard Cottrell viewed this method of using communities as testing ground for their theories as elitist.[126] Cottrell believed the poor themselves should direct the rebuilding of their community. Professional reformers would be needed at first to teach locals their legal rights and how to organize politically, but the aim was to have professionals, like social workers, no longer be needed. Cottrell was more distrustful of the role of experts because of his faith in individual initiative and self-reliance.[127] He believed that dependency on professionals was damaging to the poor; therefore, asserting that poverty had psychological elements that could not be fixed by jobs alone. By reestablishing community in a large, impersonal and bureaucratic city, the poor would be able to take the initiative to prevent juvenile delinquency. Overall, Cottrell's view was anti-

[122] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 412.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 91.
[125] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 115-120; Sundquist, *Politics and Policy,* 141-150; James Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty,* 130-138.
[126] Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage,* 69.
[127] Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, 130.

elitist because the poor themselves would be reorganizing their communities instead of professional reformers. RFK shared similar views with Cottrell. RFK's belief in the importance of self-direction by the poor can be seen in his statement during the House Committee on Education and Labor about the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. He says that part of the helplessness felt by the poor comes from the feeling of powerlessness to affect big city institutions that service the poor.[128]

Thus, the new strategy of participation by the poor was combined with the preference for community focus, and "[t]he new mechanism for attacking the localized structural and environmental causes of juvenile delinquency…came to be known as community action."[129] The idea of community action originated in RFK's Justice Department and reflected his political preferences. Edward Schmitt, in *President of the Other America*, contends that RFK was guided by a "distinctive communitarian conception of government"[130] that assessed issues on the basis of the potential threats or benefits to the community.[131] However, this approach to juvenile delinquency policy was derailed by a switch in administration and because of differences—ideological and personal—between RFK and President Johnson. Johnson's War on Poverty did not adopt community action as the main mechanism for fighting poverty. Although the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the act that legislated Johnson's War on Poverty, was not directly focused don juvenile delinquency, it would attack poverty as a way of reducing youth crime.

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[128] *Statement of the Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General of the United States, before the House Committee on Education and Labor, in support of H.R. 10440, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964,* April 7, 1964.
[129] Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 91.
[130] Ibid, 6.
[131] Ibid, 16.

Chapter 4

Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson

"It is fair to say," wrote RFK's brother Edward Kennedy, "that Bobby and Lyndon Johnson had a complicated relationship."[132] The two men were opposites in so many ways: RFK grew up wealthy, President Johnson in poverty; RFK was a Northerner while Johnson was a Southern; Johnson was seventeen years older than RFK; RFK was a devout Catholic and Johnson belonged to the Disciples of Christ. This last difference is an underappreciated difference between the two men.

During RFK's political career the Church was changing along with a rapidly changing world. In May 1961—around the time that RFK was becoming more involved in anti-juvenile delinquency efforts—Pope John XXII issued a Papal encyclical *Mater et Magistra*. The encyclical expanded on the ideas of the Catholic social teachings found in earlier Papal encyclicals. Pope Leo XIII spoke out against inhumane working conditions in an 1891 encyclical entitled *Rerum novarum*, or Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor. Pope Leo XIII asserted that the Church must speak out on social issues. The 1961 encyclical followed that tradition and stated that the "enormous wealth, the unbridled luxury, of the privileged few stands in violent, offensive contrast to the utter poverty of the vast majority."[133] As a devout Catholic, RFK was likely aware these changes within the Church, and some of the social teachings are reflected in his politics.

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[132] Kennedy, *True Compass*, 227.

[133] Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, May 15, 1961.

Catholic social teachings emphasis community and a preference for local initiatives.[134] According to Philip Land, a Jesuit priest and a professor, the social teachings emphasize that "human dignity can be recognized and protected only in community with others."[135] The idea of subsidiarity states that "responsibilities and decisions should be attended to as close as possible to the level of individual initiative in local communities."[136] These lessons are reflected in RFK's thoughts on the role of community in preventing juvenile delinquency.[137]

The tensions between the two men, according to Edward Kennedy, originated in the 1960 presidential primary.[138] RFK did not want Johnson as vice president because Johnson had challenged JFK for presidential nomination. RFK made his reservations clear, and the two men never trusted each other after that.[139] The contempt between the two continued as they battled for power within the Kennedy administration. They later battled for control of JFK's legacy. RFK saw Johnson as a usurper to JFK's legacy while Johnson was suspicious that RFK would try to undermine him and his presidency. The strained relationship between RFK and Johnson shifted juvenile delinquency policy towards a focus on the individual, instead of on the community, and represented a deeper tension within liberalism.

Early War on Poverty Planning

The origins of the War on Poverty started during the Kennedy administration. JFK succeeded in getting Congress to improve a tax cut to stimulate spending and investment, and

[134] Philip S. Land, *Catholic Social Teaching: As I have Lived, Loathed, and Loved it* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994), 20-22.
[135] Land, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 20.
[136] Ibid, 21.
[137] See Chapter 3 for a discussion about RFK's views on community.
[138] Kennedy, *True Compass,* 227.
[139] Ibid.

this tax cut mainly benefitted middle and upper income groups.[140] JFK wanted to do something for lower income groups; therefore, he instructed Walter Heller, head of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, to gather policy proposals from various cabinet departments to address poverty. The rediscovery of poverty played a role in JFK selecting poverty as the focus of his 1964 legislation.[141] Heller started by sending out a memo, titled "'64 Legislative Programs for Widening Participation in Prosperity," to various executive departments for ideas.[142] The memo identified three approaches that poverty programs should address: preventing entry into poverty, promoting exits from poverty, and alleviating difficulties of people who cannot escape poverty.[143] David Hackett, director of President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency (PCJD), got involved immediately. By this time, Hackett had become interested in poverty issues and had linked it to his work with juvenile delinquency. In fact, Hackett wrote a memo—dated November 6, 1963—to RFK, stating that fighting poverty was the real objective of the PCJD: "Because of the intimate relationship between poverty and crime, our comprehensive programs of delinquency prevention and control have inevitably led to attempts to deal with poverty and its effects. The Juvenile Delinquency program has emphasized access to opportunity for youth as a way of combatting poverty; thus, the Juvenile Delinquency program has, in fact, concentrated its resources on attacks on poverty in selected cities."[144] Two weeks later, JFK was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

The relationship between RFK and Johnson deteriorated further following the death of JFK. "Four or five matters," RFK old John Bartlow Martin in an interview, "…arose during the

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[140] Schmitt, *President of the Other America,* 90.

[141] See Chapter 2 for a discussion about the rediscovery of poverty.

[142] Hackett discussed the memo in a 1970 oral interview. David L. Hackett, recorded interview by John W. Douglas, October 21, 1970, (88), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Memo from Hackett to RFK, Nov 6, 1963. Memo File, Hackett papers, JFKL.

period of November 22 to November 27 which made me bitterer, unhappy at least, with Lyndon Johnson."[145] One matter occurred the day after the assassination when RFK went to the Oval Office to ensure that his brother's papers had been cleared out. RFK ran into JFK's secretary Evelyn Lincoln who was upset because Johnson had told her to get her things out of her desk, so his secretary could come in.[146] The incident served to further solidify RFK's image of Johnson as a usurper. Meanwhile, Johnson was looking ahead to the upcoming election, and he saw RFK as his most dangerous rivalry in the party. Johnson was afraid that sentiments about JFK during the convention would force him into putting RFK on the ticket. However, as the summer worn on, it became clear that he could "trounce Goldwater without any help from" RFK, so Johnson selected Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey instead.[147] The transition between the two administrations had an impact on anti-juvenile delinquency efforts: community action as a method to fight poverty would be replaced by the Job Corps.

Hackett's poverty plan was outlined in a proposal, which he submitted to Heller on December 1, 1963. Heller told Johnson a day after the assassination about the planning for poverty legislation, and Johnson replied, "Go ahead. Give it the highest priority. Push ahead full tilt."[148] Hackett's proposal called for learning more about poverty in America, because, as he put it, "basically…we just didn't know enough" to declare an attack on poverty.[149] He intended to send planners into communities ranging from urban to rural and from Native American to Mexican-American. The planners would educate themselves on the problems faced by the poor in those communities by listening to the poor. After this phase, communities would be chosen for

[145] RFK, in Martin interview, May 14, 1964, I, 30. JFK Oral History Program.
[146] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 627.
[147] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 142.
[148] Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), 287.
[149] Hackett oral interview, 88.

demonstration projects where local solutions proposed by residents would be applied, and once enough projects had been implemented then the government could plan an attack on poverty. Essentially, Hackett wanted community action to be the basis of the poverty program. He envisioned these demonstration projects being planned and implemented by "development corporations" that were federally funded and staffed, in part, by poor people from the community. Similar to the PCJD programs, Hackett's proposal aimed to get around the federal bureaucracy. Hackett proposed a Cabinet Committee on Poverty made up of representatives from various cabinet agencies.[150] Therefore, money could be given directly from a cabinet department to a local development corporation. All in all, Hackett's proposal mirrored the model of PCJD.

Heller brought Hackett's proposal to LBJ around Christmas. Johnson was not impressed. He was more interested in something bigger, something like the New Deal, and did not like the experimental nature of the proposal.[151] LBJ was shaped by the New Deal, but in different ways than RFK. According to Richard Goodwin, one of LBJ's speechwriters, LBJ was proudest of leading the National Youth Administration, a New Deal program, during his early career.[152] In fact, LBJ embraced the programs of the New Deal and "wanted to out Roosevelt Roosevelt."[153] Unlike RFK, Johnson saw the federal government as essential in the War on Poverty.[154]

Frustrated by the slow speed of planning, on February 1, 1964, Johnson appointed Sargent Shriver to head the planning for the War on Poverty. Shriver was married to RFK's sister Eunice, but RFK did not take to the appointment kindly. According to Harris Wofford, an

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[150] Hackett mentioned that the Department of Education and the Department of Labor would be part of the Cabinet Committee on Poverty but does not name any other departments.
[151] Stricker, *Why America Lost the War on Poverty*, 48; Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 123.
[152] Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1988), 396.
[153] Ibid, 389.
[154] See Chapter 2 for RFK's reservations about the federal government.

aide on the 1960 campaign, special assistant to JFK for civil rights and Shriver's assistant at the Peace Corps, Shriver was entrusted with much of JFK's funeral arrangements. His close collaboration with Johnson—who RFK saw an usurper—was a source of tension between Shriver and RFK.[155] In addition, RFK was interested in leading the planning and felt snubbed by Johnson with the appointment of Shriver.[156] Following the appointment of Shriver, RFK was ousted from planning. Additionally, according to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served in the Labor Departments of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, RFK and other Kennedy men such as Hackett and Theodore Sorensen, JFK's former speechwriter, were ousted from planning because Johnson and his White House staff viewed them "with suspicion, fear and distaste."[157]

Shriver and Johnson shared similar views on community action: both did not like it. Shriver wanted something he could "sell" to Johnson that was "simple, clean, [and] capable of producing fast results" and did not think community action was it.[158] However, Richard Boone, one of the only Kennedy men retained by the Johnson administration, remained involved enough in the planning to push for community action. Boone was a product of the Chicago School of Sociology,[159] and started his career as a police captain in Cook County, Illinois. He caught the eye of RFK who brought him to work on with a Department of Justice program of college service corps in Appalachia. Hackett recruited Boone to help with his proposal because Hackett was also interested in starting a national service corp. Boone remained involved in the War on Poverty planning and advocated for the famous phrase "maximum feasible understanding" of residents in the Community Action Programs (CAPs) of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

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[155] Wofford, *Of Kennedy and Kings*, 288.
[156] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 638 and Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 97.
[157] Daniel P. Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 80.
[158] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America,* 124.
[159] For more about the Chicago School of Sociology, see Chapter 3.

It is unclear who originally came up with the phrase, but Boone pushed for its inclusion. [160] In one planning meeting, Adam Yarmolinsky, deputy director of the War on Poverty, complained that Boone had used the phrase "maximum feasible participation" four or five times, and Boone responded, "How many more times do I have to use it before it becomes part of the program?" Yarmolinsky replied, "Oh, a couple more times." Boone did, and the phrase ended up in the legislation.[161]

RFK explained the importance of the term "maximum feasible participation" during a testimony to the House of Representatives:

> The component programs of a community action program are important. But it is just as important that…they be built together. The institutions which affect the poor—education, welfare, recreation, business, labor—are huge, complex structure. Operating far outside their control. They plan programs for the poor, not with them. Part of the sense of helplessness and futility comes from the feeling of powerlessness to affect the operation of these organizations. The community action programs must basically change these organization by building into the program real representation for the poor. This bill calls for maximum feasible participation of the residents. This means the involvement of the poor in planning and implementing programs; giving them a real voice in their institutions.[162]

The poor would use this power to reshape institutions, according to RFK. CAPs were an attempt to redistribute power to the poor. Allen Matusow, a post-World War II historian, describes the CAPs as having "reform implications" because the poor would gain control of their neighborhoods or organized so they could demand institutional change.[163] By the time the bill went to Congress, few people outside the Kennedy circle realized the reform implications of community action. Johnson and other members of Congress believed community action to be a

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[160] Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, xvi.
[161] Wofford, *Of Kennedy and Kings*, 294.
[162] U.S House of Representatives Subcommittee on the War on Poverty Program, *Hearings on the Economic Opportunity act of 1964*, 88th, Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), April 7, 1964, 330.
[163] Matusow, 125.

different way of delivering services to the poor.[164] Johnson saw CAPs as equivalent to the National Youth Demonstration which he had headed during the New Deal.[165] Neither Johnson nor Congress caught the reformist implications and Title II was not highly debated. The January 21 draft of the bill was fully based on community action. But Shriver was brought in shortly after and community action slipped from the focus. It became "an item in the antipoverty program, but only that. It was no longer the program itself."[166] In fact, community action slipped to the second section of the bill: the Job Corp became the center of Title I of the Economic Opportunity Act.

Johnson sent the Economic Opportunity Act to Congress on March 16, 1964. It proposed the creation of an Office of Economic Opportunity that would administer community action programs and run the Job Corp. To Johnson, both programs were about delivering services. The differences between the two programs highlight the differences between RFK and Johnson and a wider difference between RFK's liberalism and mainstream liberals.

Job Program vs. Job Training

Yarmolinsky, deputy director of the War on Poverty planning, brought in poverty experts Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America*, and Paul Jacobs, a left-wing author and journalist: both men were deemed the "radicals" by Yarmolinsky. [167] Harrington and Jacobs stressed the importance of a jobs program to fight poverty. However, Yarmolinsky believed the idea to be unrealistic because of the cost. William Wirtz, Department of Labor Secretary, proposed a $1.25 billion public works project funded by a tax on cigarettes. When Shriver brought up the idea at a cabinet meeting with the president, LBJ gave him a blank stare and then

[164] Ibid.
[165] Matusow, *The Unraveling of America,* 125.
[166] Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 84.
[167] Unger, *The Best of Intentions,* 81.

said that it would not be discussed.[168] Johnson had practical reasons to oppose a jobs program. A jobs program would likely mean a tax increase and Johnson had just won a tax cut from Congress that his advisors ensured him would lead to job creation.[169]

In contrast, RFK embraced the idea of a jobs program. "He preferred legislation to create jobs" because "his puritan ethic emphasized the dignity of work."[170] Beyond his personal preference for job programs, on his tours of Harlem and Washington D.C., the youth he talked to told him that jobs would help alleviate crime in their neighborhoods.[171] In fact, in the summer of 1964, RFK drafted a memo to Johnson that suggested a jobs programs as a solution to the outbreak of urban violence.[172] In the end, the War on Poverty was based on providing training for jobs—instead of providing actual jobs. Johnson's embrace of mainstream liberalism helps explains this.

Johnson and Shriver found Job Corps the "most appealing" of the War on Poverty programs.[173] Title I of the Economic Opportunity Act set up the Job Corp. The program was targeted to low-income men ages sixteen to twenty-one, and the program aimed to provide job training. The idea behind the Job Corp followed the structuralist view of poverty.[174] Structuralists saw poverty as a result of those left behind by economic growth because of racism or a lack of job skills. The Job Corps attempted to address the issue of lack of job skills among unemployed men. Johnson believed in this structuralist solution because he was a mainstream liberal.

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[168] Unger, *The Best of Intentions*, 83.
[169] Stricker, *Why America Lost the War on Poverty*, 49.
[170] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 340.
[171] See Chapter 3.
[172] Memo found in Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 305.
[173] Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 99.
[174] See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the structuralist view of poverty.

Johnson's Great Society was an extension of the mainstream liberalism. Johnson was shaped by many of the same things RFK was but came to different conclusions. He was a product of the New Deal and was shaped by the Cold War: he embraced the programs of the New Deal and anti-communist, as evidenced by the fight against communism in Vietnam**.** Johnson's reliance on New Economics and the paradox of affluence are shown in his 1965 State of the Union address. These aspects demonstrate the aspects of mainstream liberalism in the Great Society. In his State of the Union address, Johnson acknowledged the central tenant of the New Economics—economic growth—when he says, "greatest upward surge of economic well-being in the history of any nation."[175]

Also, Johnson addressed the paradox of affluence that helped led to poverty becoming a national issue. He said, "We do not intent to live in the midst of abundance, isolated from neighbors and nature, confined by blighted cities and bleak suburbs."[176] The mention of being "isolated from neighbor" and "confined by blighted cities and bleak suburbs" echoed Michael Harrington's argument in *The Other America* that the poor were becoming more invisible in cities as more and more people were moving to the suburbs.[177] Additionally, later in the address, Johnson acknowledges that "far too many are still trapped in poverty and idleness and fear."[178] This also echoes Harrington's argument about the psychological condition of the culture of poverty.[179] Johnson's embrace of the culture of poverty and structural poverty provides an explanation for why the War on Poverty focused on individuals and not communities.

[175] Lyndon B. Johnson, State of the Union Address, January 8th, 1964.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Harrington, *The Other America*, 10.
[178] Lyndon B. Johnson, State of the Union Address, January 8th, 1964.
[179] Harrington, *The Other America*, 10.

RFK Moves On

Tensions between RFK and Johnson continued during War on Poverty planning. One first incident that created strain between the two men involved J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Under the Kennedy administration, the FBI reported directly to the Attorney General—not the White House. However, Hoover and Johnson were friends for some time. When Hoover moved to cut the Attorney General out of the chain of command, Johnson did not stop it.[180] The second incident revolved around Johnson's rumored decision to place Thomas Mann in charge of Latin America affairs. RFK did not like Mann's attitudes towards the Alliance for Progress—an aid program created by the Kennedy administration that aimed to better relationships between the United States and Latin America countries.[181] On December 13 during a meeting with Richard Goodwin and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., RFK made his frustrations with Johnson clear. He warned that the power of Kennedy appointees—which included himself—would last just eleven months then would "disappear the day of the election. After November 5th we'll all be dead."[182] He continued:

> Sure, I've lost a brother. Other people lose wives…But that's not what's important. What's important is what we were trying to do for this country. We worked hard to get where we are, and we can't let it all go to waste. My brother barely had a chance to get started—and there is so much now to be done—for the Negroes and the unemployed and the school kids and everyone else who is not getting a decent break in our society. That is what counts. The new fellow [LBJ] doesn't get this. He knows all about politics and nothing about human beings.[183]

The tension between RFK and Johnson continued to grow. RFK and other Kennedy officials were forced out of War on Poverty planning, and Shriver's appointment to head the planning dashed RFK's hopes to get involved in the attack on poverty. RFK was moved by a note made

[180] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* 629.
[181] Ibid, 631.
[182] Quoted in Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 631.
[183] Ibid.

by JFK during his last cabinet meeting on October 29, 1963.[184] JFK had written the word poverty on a scrap piece of paper and circled it. RFK grabbed onto poverty as "a kind of last testament" and the scrap piece of paper framed.[185] RFK was indeed looking for an issue to make his own. RFK spoke to journalist Murray Kempton about his future, and Kempton wrote that "Robert Kennedy said to an old friend from the papers that he had to find a goal for the first time in his life because for as long as he could remember he had had no goal that was not his brother's."[186] RFK's drive to find that goal was heightened after he was snubbed for the vice-presidential nomination by Johnson.

The vice presidency was vacant and was set to be filled at the 1964 Democratic convention in August. However, given the contemptuous relationship between men, it is unlikely to LBJ even seriously considered RFK for the job. On July 29, RFK met Johnson at the White House and Johnson informed him that he would not choose RFK for the job. Schlesinger recounted that RFK was "relieved" that he was not on the ticket. RFK told Schlesinger and other friends: "Aw, what the hell…let's go form our own country."[187] While not entirely serious, RFK did intend to get out from under Johnson and embark on his own into politics. He announced his candidacy for the New York Senate seat on August 22 and resigned as Attorney General on September 2, after getting the party nomination. RFK won the election by seven hundred thousand votes and ended his victory speech with a quote from Tennyson's *Ulysses*: "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world."[188]

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[184] Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, 289.
[185] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 280.
[186] Murray Kempton, "Robert F. Kennedy: Pure Irish," *TNR*, February 15, 1964, 9.
[187] Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 661.
[188] Quoted in Thomas, Robert *Kennedy: His Life*, 302.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

RFK's evolution was not yet complete when he won his senate seat. As a senator, RFK continued to visit communities stricken by poverty and "demanded to see the worst of it" including "the lost and forgotten, particularly abandoned youth."[189] RFK continued to learn about poverty and relate to experiences he never had personally. During a trip to view working conditions of coal mines in Latin America in 1966, remarked, "I'd be a communist too."[190] After the urban race riots, RFK became to think if his life "was still a struggle…[w]hat life must be like for a poor black men in a ghetto like Harlem or Watts."[191] His remarkable empathy guided his time as a Senator, as it had guided him during his anti-juvenile delinquency efforts. RFK used the Senate "effectively as a bully pulpit" to fight poverty.[192] When funding War on Poverty programs were threatened, RFK openly criticized the Johnson administration. RFK's disagreements with mainstream liberalism would intensify during his senate career. Further work could examine RFK fought juvenile delinquency and poverty as senator and how those efforts differed from other liberals.

His unique brand of liberalism is too often overlooked to focus on his supposed transformation from a conservative to a liberal. JFK's death is too often cited as the source of his transformation. However, the qualities that shaped RFK into a champion of the poor and an opponent of injustice were there from the beginning. The beliefs in community solutions were

[189] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 261.
[190] Ibid, 309.
[191] Ibid, 317.
[192] Ibid, 304.

also there from the beginning. It was misfortune that community action did not have a larger role in the War on Poverty. "Liberalism became pragmatic and realistic" after the summers of urban riots: "[i]t was less visionary, less politically combative, less intellectually flexible."[193] Maybe community action would have achieved the objective of eliminating poverty in America. But RFK's story is filled with what-ifs: what if he had lived, and what if he had won? Maybe his unique brand of liberal would have united the country during the rocky late 1960s.

[193] Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir,* 61.

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