

If we believe the beginnings of the war on poverty have been auspicious, let us not dismember the program, but rather continue, enlarging it as need and demand dictate.

As originally envisioned there was supposed to be a dramatic increase in funds for the war on poverty as programs mature. This was a rational approach based upon the recognition that it would take some cities and localities time to gear up for action. Now there are nearly twice as many cities involved as at the outset, and given the slight increase in appropriations being sought this year, the net result represents an outright reduction in the level of funding per city. As a result we find ourselves in a position of having to run faster just to maintain our ground when the demands of the situation clearly dictate all-out effort.

Opponents of the OEO would destroy the one Federal agency which serves as a spokesman for the poor. The alleged purpose of such reorganization is to promote efficiency by sorting out OEO functions among existing departments already dealing with similar problems—by putting all programs relating to education in HEW, for example, and all programs relating to manpower training in the Department of Labor, etc. Such a reorganization may be an attractive one on an organizational chart, but not in practice.

By dismembering the OEO, by lodging its programs in already high overburdened bureaucracies, opponents of the war on poverty would reduce it to a series of minor, unrelated and ineffective skirmishes.

One Washington wag has suggested that if dismembering an agency is the way to promote organizational efficiency, why limit the process to the Office of Economic Opportunity? Why not apply it to the most expensive operation in the entire Government, the Department of Defense?

Since recruitment for the Armed Forces is basically a manpower problem, this line of reasoning goes, it should be turned over to the Department of Labor and the work of the Medical Corps should be turned over to the Public Health Service. The Continental Army Command should be transferred to the Department of the Interior; the fleet to the Maritime Administration; the food service to Howard Johnson's; the military airlift command to TWA; and the Signal Corps to A.T. & T. This is, of course, ridiculous but I hope it makes a point.

It hardly seems that the best way to achieve results in the poverty program is to fragment program among existing bureaucracies which are already having difficulty administering the responsibilities they already have.

This is not to say that there might not come a time in the future when some distribution of programs generated by the OEO among on-going departments might be indicated. Such considerations may well be appropriate at some future date—say, five or ten years after initial funding—or at a time when such program can be said to have been clearly established in practice and the public consciousness. But, again, it needs to be borne in mind that the OEO is just a bit more than two-and-a-half years old. It is premature to consider reshuffling its obligations and responsibilities at this early and critical juncture.

It should also be borne in mind that the OEO now administers only about 10 percent of all Federal program relating to poverty. In the view of the Urban League, to leave the OEO with less than a 10 percent responsibility for program in the war on poverty would be a grievous error.

Destruction of the OEO would turn out to be the destruction of the most ambitious, innovative and imaginative program the Nation has ever undertaken to help the poor become self-sufficient. Running such a program requires an organization with the freedom to innovate and experiment in areas that cut across departmental lines. In any well-run program the ultimate authority must be vested in one individual. If the OEO were dismembered, who would supply the direction of the program?

By killing the OEO, we would, for all intents and purposes, be turning our backs on the poor, sweeping the problems of the poor under the rug. We would kill the voice of the poor at the highest levels of government, and in so doing, regress to the administrative doldrums of earlier years when welfare was the only way of life for those in poverty.

The Office of Economic Opportunity is demonstrating that there are ways by which the poor can become self-sufficient, ways by which youngsters can be moved out of the poverty that has gripped their families. One of the major reasons for creation of the OEO, in the first place, with its community action component, was that the existing welfare bureaucracy, both governmental and private,