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When Old Age Changed: Inventing the "Senior State," 1945-1975

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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WHEN OLD AGE CHANGED:

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by

BENJAMIN HELLWEGE

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ABSTRACT

When Old Age Changed: Inventing the "Senior State," 1945-1975

by

Benjamin Hellwege

Advisor: Gerald Markowitz

This dissertation asks why public assistance at the federal level in the United States has become significantly oriented towards the needs of older Americans since the New Deal era. It argues that in effect the United States has developed an old age welfare state – a “senior state,” in other words, which has sought primarily to protect the economic status of older Americans, and that the creation of this “senior state” represents the end-point of a long-term project by social reformers, organized labor, and old age advocacy organizations over the course of the second half of the 20th century to institutionalize federal responsibility for the elderly. Unlike the controversies which surrounded programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), contributory programs such as Social Security and Medicare as well as noncontributory initiatives funded by the federal government to assist older Americans enjoyed far more social and political legitimacy. My research argues that this acceptance of programs to help older Americans was the product of a unique alliance between government officials, organized labor, and civic organizations which ensured that both adequate public funding and social legitimacy would be reserved to protect programs for older Americans.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No dissertation is the work of a single individual. Like many other graduate students, I enjoyed the blessings of ample assistance along the way. And, like so many other beginning scholars before me, I found that the work of planning, researching, and writing a dissertation to be a long and frequently solitary process. It would be supremely ungrateful, then, if I did not acknowledge the enormous amount of help and support that I received over the course of completing my dissertation.

Nearly every work of original historical research relies at one point or another on the archives as well as the skilled care and attention of archivists, who are frequently the unsung heroes of the historical profession. I made extensive use of the archival material held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), especially the materials held in the various Presidential Libraries scattered across the United States. Brian McNerney and Allen Fisher were marvelous hosts and guides during my two trips to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. Robert Clark (now at the Rockefeller Archive Center) and the rest of the wonderful staff at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library were always happy to help me out during my expeditions to Hyde Park. Kevin Bailey at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library made my trip to Abilene, Kansas a fruitful and productive one. David Clark guided me through the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Missouri. Jeremy Schmidt helped lead me through the voluminous holdings at the Gerald R. Ford Library and helped make my trips to Ann Arbor that much more worthwhile. Richard McCulley at NARA’s Center for Legislative Archives in Washington, D.C. was a supremely gracious host and pointed me in the right direction through the archives there.

Alongside my visits to various NARA facilities, Linnea Anderson and her colleagues patiently helped me identify and examine valuable holdings at the Social Welfare History Archives
at the University of Minnesota. I also wish to thank the staffs of the University of Chicago’s Special Collections and Research Center, the Wisconsin State Historical Society, the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, and the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library for all of their help and tireless willingness to retrieve boxes on my behalf.

I gratefully acknowledge and thank the following institutions for their generous financial support of my research, and without whose assistance I would not have been able to have undertaken – let alone complete – this work: a Grant-in-Aid provided by the Friends of the University of Wisconsin Libraries; a Research Grant provided from the Harry S. Truman Library Institute; a Researcher Travel Grant from the Gerald R. Ford Library Foundation; a Moody Research Grant provided by the Lyndon B. Johnson Library Foundation; a Bordin Gillette Researcher Travel Fellowship provided by the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library; a Robert L. Platzman Memorial Fellowship from the University of Chicago Libraries; a Provost’s Summer Research Award provided by the Provost’s Office of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York; an Early Research Initiative Knickerbocker Award for Archival Research in American Studies and a Doctoral Student Research Grant provided by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York; an award from the Elmer L. Andersen Research Scholars Program of the University of Minnesota; a Dissertation Fellowship provided by the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York; and finally an Albert Beveridge Research Grant provided by the American Historical Association that enabled me to complete the last bit of necessary archival work.

Graduate school has been an interesting odyssey, to say the least, but I am thankful for the friendships I made with my fellow students and for the guidance and mentorship I received from my teachers, most of whom were probably far more forgiving than they should have been with me. At the CUNY Graduate Center I learned how to be a historian from Joshua Freeman, Andreas Killen,
Kathleen McCarthy, James Oakes, Jonathan Rosenberg, the late Judith Stein, and Randolph Trumbach, and I remain grateful to them for their generously shared wisdom, good humor, and the example of their scholarship. Additionally, I would like to thank Marilyn Weber and Helena Rosenblatt for helping me to navigate through the frequently intricate maze of graduate school. Andrew Robertson also helped me at a crucial time in my progress to the Ph.D., and while I was not privileged to take a course with him, I remain grateful for his help. Alan Brinkley at Columbia University was kind enough to let me enroll in his seminar on the Great Depression during the Tea Party-fueled political backlash in 2010 when I was just beginning to think about this project. Finally, Jonathan Rosenberg deserves additional praise for a last-minute assist; without him, this dissertation might never have made it past the finish line.

Of course, I would not have survived graduate school if I had not been able to call upon the support offered by my friends and extended family. Thomas Elrod and Avishai Weiss have cheered me on ever since I began graduate school, and have commiserated with me over many an alcoholic libation. Barry Goldberg has been my friend since very nearly the first day of graduate school; his sardonic sense of humor and well-organized parties helped take the edge off during my early years in the program. At the CUNY Graduate Center History Program I was also fortunate enough to enjoy the friendship of John Blanton, Megan Brown, Mila Burns, Vanessa and Geoff Burrows, Mariel Isaacson, Micki Kaufman, Miriam Liebman, Anton Masterovoy, Glen Olson, Lauren Saxton, Nora Slonimsky, Antonella Vitale, and Anthony Zacchino. Bryan and Rachel Baron Singer provided me with much appreciated companionship during my research visits to Ann Arbor, as did my uncle Norman Black and my cousins Lauren and Joel Black when I was in Chicago.

I would be remiss if I did not single out my adviser Gerald Markowitz for praise. Perhaps more than anyone else in graduate school, Jerry has guided me and shaped me as a researcher and as a writer, despite the fact that I somewhat accidentally ended up as one of his advisees. Jerry never
hesitated to take time out of his own busy schedule to help me when I needed it most, and his faith in me and this project helped me to keep going when the going seemed to be nearly impossible. I hope that I have rewarded that faith.

It should go without saying, but I am truly blessed to have had the assistance and love of my family throughout the long journey from graduate student to Ph.D. My parents Elisabeth and Victor Hellwege have always been there for me. At the risk of sounding maudlin, words cannot adequately express how profoundly thankful I am to them for all they have done for me. They believed in me, they supported me, they have done everything in their power and more to help me achieve my dreams, and I could not have asked for better parents. My sister Samantha Hellwege provided me with unwavering support and much needed comic relief. I remain grateful to her for our many amusing conversations in transit to and from Tarrytown, New York City, and a hundred other places around the world. My grandmother Rhoda M. Patsner remains an inspiration to me. Whenever I felt my resolve begin to falter, I reflected on the many hurdles that she had to overcome in her personal and professional life, and that knowledge made me all the more grateful for the rare opportunity that I was afforded to undertake this project. My parents-in-law Holly and Ira Marx have been, as always, gracious and welcoming to me, and I feel supremely privileged to now be able to call them family. I am grateful for all of their help, and for the warmth which they and the rest of the extended Marx and Falkenstein families have embraced me. I regret that I was not able to share the joy of completing my dissertation with my late grandfather Sherwin Patsner, my aunt Susan Patsner Black, and my uncle Mark Hellwege. I think of them often, and feel their absence at every family gathering.

Last but most certainly not least, I dedicate this dissertation to my wife Judith. She cheerfully endured life for years with an irascible graduate student who was frequently on the road for weeks at a time, and unfailingly supported me at every step along the way. I know that I shall
never be able to fully repay her for her love and many kindnesses, but perhaps this dissertation will be a start.
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INTRODUCTION

The sun dawned bright and clearly over Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, July 14, 1965, a perfectly ordinary day in the nation’s capital. Cars, buses, and trucks caught in morning rush hour traffic sat snarled at traffic lights on the city’s great wide boulevards, filling the air with the sounds of honking vehicles, occasionally interspersed here and there with the static-riddled cackle of radios and the chatter of construction workers and pedestrians. Even though it was not yet afternoon, Washington’s traditionally sweaty, sticky, and generally miserable summer humidity had already begun to suffocate the city’s gleaming white marble buildings in a merciless, stifling embrace.

On Capitol Hill, Congress had convened to consider a wide variety of major and minor legislative proposals. For months, the 89th Congress had been debating and passing bills at a breakneck speed that had not been seen in a generation. Already, the Congress had considered more measures in the first six months of 1965 than had been on the docket during FDR’s celebrated Hundred Days in 1933, and several major pieces of legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Voting Rights Act, Medicare and Medicaid (more properly, the Social Security Act Amendments of 1965), the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 had either been enacted or soon would be. If, as Robert Caro has observed, the United States Senate’s chief function in the past had been to dam and hold back legislative proposals designed to deal with the pressing social and political issues of the day, then the chamber’s busy, humming activity throughout 1965 probably stands out as the exception which proves the rule.1

The Senate’s busy schedule owed much to Lyndon Johnson – one of its former members – who now sat in the Oval Office. Fresh off of a successful spring legislative session, Johnson signed the Older Americans Act into law after a short ceremony in the Rose Garden. In many of the next

1 Robert A. Caro, The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate, Volume 3 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), pgs. 3-78, see esp. 33-46.
day’s newspapers, coverage of the event attracted mildly interested but perfunctory attention. The *New York Times* relegated the story to its middle pages, buried near advertisements for Pan American Airlines’ new routes to Europe and cheap men’s clothing stores.\(^2\) The press’s lack of interest in the story was understandable. The real legislative battle, everyone knew, was still over the fate of the proposed Medicare and Medicaid legislation (to say nothing of the Voting Rights Act). In the specific case of Medicare and Medicaid, liberals had been fighting for these measures since the twilight days of the Eisenhower administration, and it had been at times a bitter conflict in which they had tasted far more defeats than victories.

In contrast to the muted coverage of the Older Americans Act’s enactment, when the Medicare legislation was finally signed by President Johnson on July 30, 1965 at the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, newspaper coverage was lavish, generous, and practically fawning. Photographs of President Johnson signing the legislation next to a beaming but frail President Harry Truman could be found on the front page of major newspapers throughout the country, and grateful letters and telegrams from older Americans to President Johnson soon began to pour into the White House at a feverish pace. Though Medicare would not actually go into operation until 1966, liberals savored this victory over the fierce opposition led by the much-loathed and feared American Medical Association, and confidently looked forward to the day when national health insurance for all Americans – not just the elderly or the indigent – would become a reality rather than a fantasy.\(^3\)

Yet something happened on the way to achieving that goal. As we now know, the enactment of Medicare and much of the other Great Society legislation – like the Older Americans Act – that the Johnson administration had managed to steer through Congress during the brief window of


opportunity provided by the 1964 landslide election would prove to be a false dawn for liberals in the United States. For a variety of reasons – including but not limited to the disastrous war in Vietnam, the explosion of racial unrest in many American cities, and the resurgence of the powerful “conservative coalition” of southern Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill – the Great Society would prove to be a high water mark for major social reform until well into the twentieth-first century, when the hard-won enactment of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (popularly known as “Obamacare”) would resume some of the long-paused work of major national reform dating back to at least the Progressive Era.

In the meantime, though, major programs like Social Security and Medicare which did get enacted during the major moments of social reform in the twentieth century would develop in ways that had not been entirely foreseen by their architects. Social Security, for example, was never intended solely to be a program primarily oriented towards older Americans, though that is the path it has taken, and that is the way we generally understand it when it is used today in our political and social nomenclature. Instead, it was designed to act in concert with other never-enacted laws to ensure that the promise of economic security would extend to as many members of the American family as possible, rather than just its elders. As the political scientist Margaret Weir has shown, attempts to enact guarantees of full employment – with the federal government as the employer of last resort – repeatedly failed in 1945 and again in 1978, and this failure has ensured that the goal of full employment has remained more distant and aspirational than anything else. It has also meant that debates over the meaning of “Social Security” would be far more separated from debates about employment and the “right to work” than might have otherwise been the case. The policy world in

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which we live in is one shaped not just by the successes but also by the failures and “might-have-beens” which did not come to pass.

Main Argument of the Dissertation

What did happen – and this is the major argument that I shall make in this dissertation – is that the half-finished efforts to enact a broad, well-developed social welfare state in the United States resulted instead in the creation of a “senior state,” which was increasingly designed and driven over time by the concerns and demands of the nation’s eldest citizens and not necessarily by its neediest.6 This dissertation tells the story of the creation of a senior state between 1935 and 1975, starting from the time of its origins in the 1930s and 1940s, extending into its expansion between the 1950s and the mid-1970s, and ends by offering some concluding thoughts on its development since then. The construction of this state took place primarily during a time of self-assured economic growth and expansion in the United States and well before the advent of protracted economic crisis and stagnation which began in the mid-1970s. Yet even in the decades since the end of the seemingly miraculous economic prosperity which blessed the United States and much of the industrialized world after World War II, the senior state has continued to thrive, despite the rise of a committed anti-statist conservative movement that found its greatest political champion in Ronald Reagan, a bona fide “senior citizen” who had launched his national political career campaigning against the enactment of Medicare in 1964.

6 A usual explanation for this development is the voting power of the elderly. While I do not disagree that the ability of older people to participate in the political process has influenced the development of policy, I believe that this explanation oversimplifies a more complex relationship between policymaking and the elderly, and that while it may explain how some policies favoring the elderly have become more thoroughly entrenched, it does not necessarily explain how they came into existence in the first place. For example, the Townsend Movement – perhaps the most important national old-age advocacy group before the formation of the AARP – did not seek the enactment of Social Security and in fact actively crusaded against it; likewise, the AARP did not seek the enactment of Medicare and also actively fought attempts to enact that legislation. For a full examination of this question, see Andrea Louise Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
A few qualifiers are in order, though, starting with how I understand and define terminology in this dissertation. In using the term the “senior state,” I mean the collective apparatus of federal programs, agencies, laws, and initiatives – some of them famous and well known, like Social Security and Medicare, but the majority of them largely anonymous and half-forgotten, like the Older Americans Act – which have been gradually erected over time to protect the economic and social security of older Americans, who I define as people at and above the age of 65.\(^7\) This is a crude cut-off numerical measurement, to be sure, but it is the one which more often than not the federal policy makers, academic experts, and other interested parties who I examine in this dissertation used when deciding whether or not to undertake a particular action or advocate for a certain measure, even as they themselves at times recognized the sheer arbitrariness of that number. I have therefore adopted it in order to more closely track how policymakers debated the issues and questions surrounding how to best use the federal government’s resources to raise and keep older Americans above the official poverty line.

Additionally, I have deliberately placed the actions of the network of public and private social welfare policymakers responsible for the creation of the senior state at the center of this dissertation rather than the elderly themselves. I have done so not because the elderly are unimportant or because they were powerless bystanders in the development of the senior state. Rather, my decision has been guided by two factors: first, the intermittent role played by elderly

people and the organizations which claimed to speak on their behalf in driving the development of the senior state during the four decades between 1935 and 1975, and secondly by the more critical if low-profile role played by elected and unelected policymakers in translating the recurrent episodes of political activism and mobilization by older people into government policy. While the elderly did play an important role in the development of the senior state – particularly during the 1930s before and after the enactment of Social Security and again during the late 1950s and into the 1960s before and after the enactment of Medicare, when organized political and social activism amongst older people helped propel the issues of old-age economic security and health care to the forefront of the nation’s domestic policy agenda, these two programs were not the sum total of the senior state.

Instead, policymakers in states and localities with a high population of resident older people slowly constructed an infrastructure of programs and agencies to deal with a wide range of economic, social, and health issues faced by older Americans. These programs and agencies owed much to the sociological research undertaken by academic experts during the late 1940s and beyond into the actual living conditions of older Americans in various communities throughout the nation, and to the propagation of this research via state and national conferences, professional journals, and published studies. Gradually, a small but distinctive network of public and private sector individuals and organizations emerged that was dedicated to formulating proposed solutions to the problems faced by older Americans, and the implementation of these solutions – especially during the War on Poverty and thereafter – helped to justify permanent new roles for the state to play in the lives of older Americans. My dissertation therefore emphasizes how this conjunction of state power and policy formulation developed during the period between 1935 and 1975 rather than the role played by old-age social and political movements.8

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8 Important studies of old-age movements during the 1935-1975 period include but are not limited to Edwin Amenta, *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
Historiography of the American State

In positing that the United States has a “senior state,” I am building upon a recent revival in investigating the role of the state in American history as well as a long-standing interest in the politics of public relief and social reform during what Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle famously termed “the New Deal Order.” As Brian Balogh, William Novak, and James Sparrow have forcefully argued, although the United States did indeed govern differently than its industrialized counterparts in Western Europe and elsewhere, it did not necessarily govern less. Thirty years ago in his inaugural address as President of the Organization of American Historians, the eminent political historian William E. Leuchtenburg surveyed the landscape of American historiography and bemoaned the unhappy fate which had apparently befallen political history. If political history had reigned dominant in the profession during the 1950s and 1960s, it seemed by the 1980s to have fallen on hard times as social and later cultural history came to the forefront. To a large extent, this was a necessary corrective to historical scholarship which seemed to focus far too much on the role


of world-historical figures like Franklin Roosevelt. By the mid-to late 1990s, though, there was a growing sense that the pendulum had swung too far away from political history, and that while politics was not the only causative factor in explaining the recent and more distant past, it could not be entirely discounted.

In its search for a new way forward that blends the best of newer approaches centered on social and cultural history, as well as more traditional approaches concerned with political and diplomatic history, the field has seen the emergence of hybrid fields like political culture which try to examine political history outside of the traditional confines of elite actors and pivotal elections in the history of the United States. Thanks to this turn (or is it return?) to politics in the last decade, political historians have enjoyed a modest renaissance within the profession, and perhaps no school of political historians has flourished as have historians of the American state.11 The return of political history as a force to be reckoned with was announced by the publication of The Democratic Experiment in 2003.12 Recent works by scholars such as Margot Canaday, Michelle Dauber, James Sparrow, Brian Balogh and William Novak have done much to emphasize the importance of the American state in twentieth century American history and to reveal just how multifaceted that state could and continues to be.13

Perhaps nowhere was this proposition more apparent than in the programs, agencies, and other measures which were created during the post-World War II era to control and eradicate poverty among older Americans. Unlike the controversies which surrounded other programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), both contributory programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, as well as noncontributory initiatives funded by the federal government to assist older Americans enjoyed far more purchase and social legitimacy. I argue that this widespread acceptance of programs to help older Americans was the product of a long-term public and private alliance between government officials and voluntary civic organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers and the American Public Welfare Association which ensured that both adequate funding and manpower would be dedicated to maintaining programs for older Americans, and to further insulate such programs from the troubles which bedeviled the architects of the Great Society’s War on Poverty and other efforts to reform welfare in the United States.

While recent scholarship has emphasized the ways in which the American state penetrated and permeated the lives of everyday Americans – aside from more immediately obvious ways, like military service – it would be a mistake to overstate or mischaracterize the relationship between the American state and its citizens during the twentieth century. 14 Decades ago, the late Barry Karl cautioned students of twentieth-century U.S. political and social history about the fundamental ambivalence with which many Americans have viewed the American state, and the abiding distrust

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14 For a good overview of this subject, see Suzanne Mettler and Andrew Milstein, “American Political Development from Citizens’ Perspective: Tracking Federal Government’s Presence in Individual Lives over Time,” Studies in American Political Development 21 (Spring 2007): 110-130, esp. 124-125. Mettler and Milstein argue that “Americans likely gained a powerful “sense of the state” in their lives over the course of the mid-twentieth century. Compared to the years between the Civil War and the 1920s, the U.S. federal government’s role had shifted tremendously in scope, form, and character” during the era of the New Deal and up through the mid-1970s.
of centralized power and corresponding veneration of local autonomy which has characterized American society throughout much of the existence of the modern United States. Recent events such as the struggle to enact the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the furious political blowback that followed in its wake have only confirmed the power of Karl’s warning.  

Even with these qualifications, the “state” remains a useful tool of analysis (to borrow Joan Scott’s instantly classic turn of phrase). In particular, Brian Balogh has offered in his *The Associative State* a new model for students of twentieth-century American political history to employ in their examinations of the vexed story of progress and pitfall. Balogh argues that much of the scholarly literature in American political history remains trapped in an outdated model inherited from Progressive Era scholars like Charles and Mary Beard in which liberals do endless battle with conservatives. Instead, Balogh urges students of political history to focus instead on “the ways in which Americans have braided public and private actions, state and voluntary-sector institutions, to achieve collective goals without undermining citizens’ essential belief in individual freedom.” In this dissertation, I take up Balogh’s suggestion, in order to offer a new interpretation of the political history of the American welfare state during the postwar era that integrates more traditional

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15 Barry D. Karl, *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 1-6. In particular, Karl observes that “what it is essential to understand is that local government and community control remain at the heart of our most intuitive conceptions of American democracy, even though they may also represent bastions of political corruption and locally condoned injustice” (Ibid., 236). Karl’s words of caution have also been recently echoed by the late Michael Katz, who in 2009 emphasized the need for historians to deconstruct the very definition of “government” and to “pay close attention to the role of federalism in the history of American social policy” because “government, as a singular noun, is a misleading term in the American context, and state, which connotes a unitary national government, is equally diversionary. The reality is that the United States has many governments. Federalism structures every aspect of American social policy.” As a result, Katz observed that “identifying the role of government becomes even more confusing when levels of government disagree.” See Michael B. Katz, “Was Government the solution or the problem? The role of the state in the history of American social policy,” *Theory and Society* 39 (3-4):487-502 (2010), esp. 493. See also Julian E. Zelizer, “Introduction: New Directions in Policy History,” *Journal of Policy History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 1-11.


presidential-centered histories with the activities of the voluntary sector as well as state and local level actors.

Next, I do not claim in this dissertation to try and explain the life experiences of all older Americans during the period under examination (broadly defined as 1935 through 1975); rather, my focus is on how the senior state tried to ameliorate and remedy the poverty which afflicted many older Americans. Factors like race, gender, and class have ensured that there have always been (and likely will always be) some elderly people who live in destitution while others enjoy luxury in old age. My focus in this dissertation, though, is upon the halting and not always linear actions taken primarily at the state and federal levels to improve the economic and social conditions of the impoverished elderly.

Yet the struggles necessary to bring them into existence were not a foregone conclusion, and nor was it preordained that the United States would, as a matter of policy preference, end up favoring its impoverished elderly population over other presumably deserving impoverished groups. While previous generations of scholarship have rightly emphasized the roles which race and gender played in shaping the American welfare state, at times it has lost sight of the seemingly obvious elephant in the room: the role age has played in shaping the American welfare state. Consider, for example, that Medicare, which provides universal publicly subsidized health care insurance for Americans age 65 and over, had existed for nearly two generations before efforts to expand health insurance coverage to impoverished children succeeded in the form of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) in 1997. As well-informed commentators like Paul Starr have noted, the United States is the only industrialized nation which chiefly subsidizes health care overwhelmingly
for its elderly population, though of course the benefits which older Americans receive are nowhere near as generous as those of their western European counterparts.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition, I focus primarily on the activities of the executive branch, specifically the numerous presidential administrations which took hold in Washington during this time period. While I am aware of the risks of reviving what Julian Zelizer has termed the “presidential synthesis,” whereby American history is reduced simply to the story of its Presidents, I believe that this particular realm of domestic policy making is worth further scholarly exploration for several reasons.\textsuperscript{19} First, while the Constitution has traditionally afforded the President a freer hand in foreign rather than domestic policy, during the course of the twentieth century, the executive branch became more deeply and permanently involved in social welfare policymaking than it had ever been before, and that shift is reflected in part by the long-term, bipartisan consensus which gradually developed around the senior state. As it becomes clearer that we are living in a hyper-partisan period in which policymaking has become increasingly centered in the Executive Branch due to the dysfunctionality of the legislative branch, it seems worthwhile to consider the past track record of presidential administrations in this vital if sometimes overlooked area of policy reform.

Secondly, because I have been able to gain access to papers and archival sources that were previously unavailable due to donor or classified national security restrictions, this dissertation can add to the sum total of knowledge available to other scholars who may wish to tackle this subject and to make new arguments. Thirdly, I believe that there is more to the story of presidential administrations as historical actors than the actions of the presidents themselves, and therefore that


the presidency as an institution is worthy of study as an actor in domestic policymaking. As I will detail in this dissertation, the actions of administration officials, advisors, and aides helped to set the course of the federal domestic policymaking, and focusing on them thereby has the potential to offer considerable insight into the development of the senior state.

Finally, I have undertaken this dissertation because of the unique demographic moment which the United States is currently passing through at the present time. As a 2012 U.S. Census Report has noted:

Between 2012 and 2050, the United States will experience considerable growth in its older population. In 2050, the population aged 65 and over is projected to be 83.7 million, almost double its estimated population of 43.1 million in 2012. The baby boomers are largely responsible for this increase in the older population, as they began turning 65 in 2011...The projected growth of the older population in the United States will present challenges to policy makers and programs, such as Social Security and Medicare. It will also affect families, businesses, and health care providers.

As federal policymakers now and in the future wrestle with the numerous, intertwined issues involved with how to best deal with the largest elderly population in the history of the United States, an examination of the actions undertaken by their predecessors may offer some guidance or caution. While it is true that the aging of the population will have wide-ranging implications for the country, this is not the first time that Americans or their government have had to confront the question of how best to care for aging, frequently economically insecure people. During both the New Deal and the Great Society, policymakers wrestled with many of the same problems that continue to bedevil their successors.

20 Of course, this is not to say that the Presidents themselves are unworthy of detailed attention. For a recent, excellent study of the presidency in the 20th century, see William E. Leuchtenburg, The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

However, focusing primarily on the activities of the federal government has other significant limitations. What we understand as the “federal government” is in reality a mishmash of numerous agencies, commissions, departments, subgroups, and very nearly every other kind of organization split across three different branches of government, some of which not infrequently operate at cross-purposes with each other. Additionally, the United States is governed not just at the federal level, but also by fifty different and distinct state governments, to say nothing of the innumerable territorial, local, and special governmental bodies which also exercise jurisdiction within the United States. By necessity, then, this study is a selective one.

**Review of Relevant Literature in the field of U.S. Social Welfare History**

Recent scholarship has suggested that it is possible to study the presidency as an institution without necessarily focusing solely on individual presidents. As Brian Balogh writes in *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency*, “now is a propitious time to integrate the presidency into cutting-edge historical scholarship because we know so much more about the context in which presidents operate and the structures that guide, and often limit, their actions and beliefs.”

Of course, this is not the first study that tackles the issue of how the presidency or the federal government more broadly defined has wrestled with the momentous issue of poverty in the twentieth century. James Patterson’s *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* examines this subject from the onset of the Progressive Era at the turn of the twentieth century through the end of the 1990s. Patterson’s scope in his study, though, is broader than the one I have set in this dissertation. For example, while Patterson considers a wider range of time and encompasses far more groups in his work than this dissertation does, both our studies share

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an emphasis on the federal government’s efforts during the War on Poverty and its aftermath. By defining a narrower focus in this dissertation, I hope to offer other scholars a new way through which to view federal efforts to ameliorate poverty, and to thereby draw attention to facets of those efforts which have not hitherto received in-depth study.

Likewise, my work is also in conversation with Alice O’Connor’s *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History.*24 O’Connor traces the development of poverty as a subject of intense academic study at institutions such as the University of Chicago to its integration as a tool of federal policymaking during the War on Poverty and the Great Society. As O’Connor writes, “the idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems has long been an article of faith in American liberalism. Nowhere is this more apparent than when it comes to solving the “poverty problem.” For well over a century, liberal social investigators have scrutinized poor people in the hopes of creating a knowledge base for informed social action.”25 Despite this faith in scientific knowledge, though, the application of “poverty knowledge” has not only failed to eradicate poverty in the United States, in the specific instance of the War on Poverty, it inadvertently made things worse by placing the onus of poverty as a personal moral failure on the individual poor rather than on broader, more deep-seated social problems like discrimination in the workplace and upward income redistribution through constant revisions to the nation’s tax code. In O’Connor’s powerful telling, there is a fairly straight line from the War on Poverty to the political and social counter-reaction to the War on Poverty during the 1970s and into the 1980s, as political conservatives seized upon the failures of the individual poor to in effect blame them (or more abstractly, fault “culture”) for the persistence of poverty.

Finally, during the 1970s and into the 1980s, there was a pronounced rise in the scholarly literature of studies which dealt with the role of special interest groups in influencing the development of social policy, especially at the federal level. In the particular case of the federal government’s approach to matters concerning the elderly, the most influential study was Henry J. Pratt’s *The Gray Lobby*, which emphasized the rise and power of organizations like the AARP in the federal policymaking process.\(^{26}\) According to Pratt, a coherent nexus of lobbying groups had emerged during the post-World War II era, and that the outpouring of federal legislation concerned with the elderly during this period was the result of much more effective organized lobbying by the AARP and other like-minded organizations. While I agree with Pratt that the AARP and other old-age advocacy groups played an important role in pushing for federal legislation on behalf of the elderly, I believe he under-emphasizes the role played by state and local officials as well as private philanthropies in building the political consensus necessary for such federal legislation. Pratt is right to argue that the AARP was better organized and has lasted longer than the Townsend Movement of the 1930s, but it also benefitted from a favorable political and social climate in which voluntary organizations once more took the lead in setting the parameters of action, a role that they had temporarily lost due to the Great Depression. Furthermore, while some old age advocacy groups – especially the National Council of Senior Citizens during the early 1960s – played a crucial role in getting legislation like Medicare enacted by generating significant grassroots support among the elderly for the measure, the AARP spent much of its early years fighting against the enactment of such legislation.

While historical scholarship explicitly focused on the general American state has gone through cycles, the literature on social welfare policy in America has flourished over the course of the last thirty years, and has been greatly enriched by the searching examinations of scholars attuned to issues of race, class, and gender, as well by the interdisciplinary contributions from economists, political scientists, and sociologists. The work of political scientists Frances Fox Piven and the late Richard Cloward critiqued the American welfare state from a New Left perspective; in their telling, public welfare provision in the United States was motivated chiefly by the desire by political and economic elites to maintain social control by ensuring that a sufficient amount of public support was made available in order to mollify social discontent.

Scholarship in the field of social welfare really took on a more pressing urgency, though, during the increasingly racialized political struggles over the place of “welfare” in American life which took place during the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to the rhetoric of politicians like Ronald Reagan about purported welfare fraud, the late historian Michael Katz and others emphasized the stinginess of the American welfare state as a constancy dating back to the institutionalization and


persistence of the English “poor law” system in first colonial and later early national America. Soon, Katz’s voice was joined by those of Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, who in their edited collection of essays in *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* situated the then ferocious debates over welfare in the 1980s within a larger historical context dating back to the New Deal era.

Subsequent scholarship has amplified many of their key arguments, including the disproportionate role of undemocratic “southern economic and social elites to affect national polices” at a time of mass disenfranchisement of African-Americans in much of the American South, with fateful consequences for the reach of programs like Social Security and the GI Bill. Skocpol’s work, in particular, blended history and sociology, and helped to redefine the periodization of the American welfare state by arguing that the United States had developed a *de facto* welfare state long before the coming of the New Deal, and that the shape of American welfare was determined not simply by the New Deal and the Great Depression but also by the lingering aftereffects of the struggles by turn of the twentieth century Progressive reformers to purge corruption from the American body politic.

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After the sociological turn in social welfare history, the field began to be influenced more and more by the path-breaking work of Linda Gordon and Alice Kessler-Harris during the early and mid-1990s. In particular, both Gordon and Kessler-Harris put gender front and center in their examination of American social welfare policy. In her work, Gordon posited that gender considerations had led the architects of the Social Security Act to favor white men under the rubric of social insurance, a category of social programs which enjoyed broad social respectability and acceptance.34 By contrast, programs which largely favored women and racial minorities fell under the category of public assistance, and the recipients of aid under these programs (which included the now defunct Aid to Families with Dependent Children program) were stigmatized on the whole by society, and their programs were and remain under near-constant political siege.35 While Gordon was not the first student of social welfare to argue that the United States had developed a two tiered welfare state, her work focused more on the network of welfare advocates (chiefly college-educated white men and white women) who helped devise and influence public social welfare in the United States between the Gilded Age and the New Deal era, and by her own admission, largely excluded

34 As Gordon writes, “one of the attractions of social insurance schemes was their rejection of this tradition of identifying the ‘deserving,’ thus insulating their recipients from stigma. Yet many social insurance advocates understood the distinction between insurance and public assistance as ideological and political, and considered “insurance” a metaphor. All tax-funded public provision is in a sense insurance, to which all contribute in order to provide for those who happen to need help…social insurance was called “contributory” (although all tax monies are in fact contributions) and could therefore be made to seem “earned” in a way that the dole was not.” (Linda Gordon, “Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the United States, 1890-1935,” The American Historical Review 97, no. 1 (Feb., 1992): 19-54 (esp. 45).

persons “whose primary contributions to the cause [of welfare reform] were made as elected officials or as philanthropists.”

While I agree with Gordon that gendered notions of family and work influenced the development of the public American welfare state before, during, and after the enactment of the Social Security Act, my study questions the extent to which Social Security’s social insurance program truly enjoyed a privileged, first-tier status. For most of its first two decades of existence, Social Security did not succeed especially well at its task of preventing economic insecurity; indeed, the failures and limitations of the program helped to spur a colossal struggle between organized labor and corporate management during the late 1940s over retirement security.

The inadequacy of Social Security also, as I argue, helped make possible the resurgence of old-age pension movements at the state and local levels of governance, and created a growing social and political vacuum which private welfare policymakers and elected public officials tried to fill, with varying amounts of success. The limits of Social Security – and the concerted efforts by organized labor, elected officials, and social reformers to expand it – also helped to feed into the emergent anti-statist critique made by the proponents of American conservatism during the postwar period, most of whom publicly alternated between gritted tolerance and outright hostility towards Social Security and other attempts to expand the American welfare state’s public provisions. Had it not been for the persistent fear of pension movements and organized labor gaining a permanent upper hand in collective bargaining agreements, though, it was just as possible in the late 1940s that Social Security would have been largely relegated to irrelevance due to its limited number of enrollees and scope of benefits.

36 Ibid., 22.
Complementing Gordon’s scholarship, Alice Kessler-Harris in her landmark work *In Pursuit of Equity: How Gender Shaped American Economic Citizenship* examined how “policies that appear neutral on their face emerge from deeply embedded belief systems that accentuate particular politics,” and like Gordon, traces how a “gendered imagination” on the part of both male and female policymakers (Kessler-Harris’s words) influenced the course of social welfare policy development by effectively institutionalizing shared assumptions about the connections between gender, family, and work (to wit: that men should be the primary breadwinner for the family, while women’s work should be treated – at best – as an adjunct to the male breadwinner role). Unlike sociologists such as Theda Skocpol who emphasized “differences in administrative and political structures” to explain the unique development of the American welfare state, Kessler-Harris argued that culture more “effectively predicts the outcomes of social legislation across national borders.”

While I agree with Kessler-Harris that “gendered imaginations” shaped how federal policymakers, I err more on the side of Skocpol’s emphasis on administrative and political structures. While the efforts by policymakers in the postwar era to address old age dependency certainly drew upon ideas of gender, the unexpected growth and popularity of Social Security’s old age assistance program as well as state level pensions between 1935 and well into the 1950s spurred deep fears among elected officials, corporate leaders, and policymakers that the social discontent which had powered the Townsend Movement to national prominence, and which had seemed so threatening to American democracy during the 1930s, might reappear. Consequently, these groups forged an uneasy alliance to develop a hybrid public-private infrastructure capable of not only offering strengthened economic support to older Americans, but also one which sought to help


define a new, positive role for older people to play in American society. These efforts, though, were limited by past policy choices, especially those made by the architects of the 1935 Social Security Act.

The analyses of the American welfare state’s development produced by Gordon and Kessler-Harris were soon amplified in two important ways, beginning in the late 1990s: first, by growing attempts to place the development of the American welfare state in a comparative, transnational context, and secondly by a more expansive definition of the “welfare state” to include the massive private welfare state largely constructed after World War II, a scholarly development made possible by the awakening of the long dormant field of business history.

Perhaps the most important scholarly work which places the development of the American welfare state in a transnational perspective is Daniel Rodgers’ *Atlantic Crossings*, in which Rodgers argued that Progressive Era reformers in the United States learned from the examples of their counterparts in Western Europe, and that many of the agenda items on the Progressive Era policy wish list were shaped by this transmission of ideas across the Atlantic. While Rodgers was not solely focused on the development of the American welfare state, his signature contribution was to show how many of the ideas and assumptions which American reformers relied upon when devising public provision programs were not demarcated solely by the boundaries of the American nation-state; rather, many of these reformers looked to Europe (and especially to Great Britain and Germany before World War I) for inspiration and examples worthy of imitation. The New Deal, in Rodgers’ telling, represented the fullest flowering of the transatlantic transfer of ideas about social reform, an argument which sharply differentiated *Atlantic Crossings* from other accounts such as

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Elizabeth Sanders’ *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State*, which focused exclusively on endogenous sources of American reform efforts.\(^{41}\)

Along with the growing scholarly interest in placing American history in a transnational context, students of the American welfare state began to shift their examinations of this subject away from discussions and arguments about the nature of “welfare” and back towards closer examinations of “the state.” The two most important works which mark the emergence of this new subfield are Jacob Hacker’s *The Divided Welfare State* and his Yale colleague Jennifer Klein’s *For All These Rights*.\(^{42}\) Hacker’s work demonstrated that prior discussions of the American welfare state were, quite simply, inadequate if they failed to take account of America’s private welfare state, a curious creature unique among industrialized nations. Instead of looking solely at major laws like the Social Security Act of 1935 or Medicare in 1965, Hacker explored how the use of taxation and regulatory policy helped usher in the private welfare state, in which an employment-centered model of social provision took root and which remains (much as the struggle over the Affordable Care Act in 2009-2012 revealed) very much at the center of present-day discussions and fights about how to provide adequate and equitable social provision.

While Hacker is a political scientist and not a historian, his methodology in *The Divided Welfare State* was at heart historical: by relying upon “path dependence” (a model of policy developed first formulated by Paul Pierson), Hacker showed how the American welfare state – at least insofar as health insurance and old age social insurance are concerned – took a winding,


frequently unpredictable path in which public provision either stood at the center or at the periphery of subsequent private social welfare provision.

Unlike Hacker, my focus in this dissertation is upon old-age assistance rather than old-age insurance programs, which Hacker mostly skips in favor of Social Security’s social insurance program. I focus on old-age assistance because – at least for the first two decades of Social Security’s existence – old age assistance remained the larger and more popular of the two programs. The choice to emphasize Social Security’s old-age insurance program over its old-age assistance program came about in large part because of the inability of state and local officials to adequately support a growing population of older Americans during the late 1940s. As the number of older Americans receiving public relief rose during the late 1940s, policymakers turned once more to Social Security’s old age insurance program and expanded it after it became clear that Social Security’s old age assistance program was encouraging fiscally unsustainable economic “dependency” by older Americans.

While Hacker tackled the development of health insurance and old age social insurance between the era of the New Deal and up through the 1990s, Jennifer Klein’s *For All These Rights* reached back further to the Progressive Era and extended through the late 1950s, with a decided emphasis on the New Deal and immediate post-war (and post-New Deal) period. For All These Rights explored the attempts by unions, fraternal organizations, and other voluntary groups to construct an economic security system separate from employment. These attempts, while enjoying some limited success in the 1930s and 1940s, were ultimately subsumed by the employment-
centered model of social provision during and after World War II, when private employers regained the upper hand in such policy developments. In effect, Klein shows how private employers (especially private commercial insurers) were able to seize the New Deal’s language of security and make it their own, and in so doing were able to begin the process of rolling back the interruption into traditional managerial prerogatives which the New Deal’s labor reforms had brought about in the 1930s.

My dissertation builds on Klein’s work and adds private voluntary organizations as well as state and local officials to the mix. Klein’s study puts these two groups largely to the side in her depiction of the struggle over political economy in the postwar United States. While discussions and conflicts about political economy and the character of the American welfare state in the postwar era were undoubtedly influenced and shaped by the struggle between labor and capital as well as the legacy of the New Deal in national politics, they were also informed by the careful observation of state and local level developments, especially in places like California and New York City, both traditional hotbeds of social unrest and reform movements.

Finally, in recent years, the vibrant new scholarship produced by students in the fields of the American state and American social welfare has begun to overlap more frequently. In 2005, political scientist Jacob Hacker, following the lead of Theda Skocpol a generation earlier, called for

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44 In Jennifer Klein’s words, “the politics of security involved a political struggle between business and labor; commercial insurers and nonprofit, community- or labor-controlled means of social provision; the state; and private capital…in order to explain the passage or defeat of social welfare benefits in the United States, therefore, it is necessary to examine the balance of power in the political economy.” Jennifer Klein, “The Politics of Economic Security” Employee Benefits and the Privatization of New Deal Liberalism,” Journal of Policy History 16, no. 1 (2004): 36.
45 As Jennifer Klein observes, “overall labor-management contracts remained closer to employment compensation and managerial employment policy than to a genuine workers’ health security program, not to mention a national health-care program. Not only could collective bargaining not substitute for national social policy; it could not succeed in meeting most of its immediate goals without the real, active backing of the New Deal state.” (Ibid., 52). Building off of Klein’s analysis, Jefferson Cowie’s recent The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) makes the case for the New Deal as the exception rather than the rule in American politics.
scholars to “[bring] the welfare state back in.” While happily surveying the tremendous increase in scholarly attention paid to the American welfare state, Hacker also drew attention to an increasing fragmentation in such studies; in his words, “a notable absence of explanatory integration” characterized many recent scholarly studies of the American welfare state. In order to remedy this scholarly fragmentation, Hacker proposed that future studies pay more attention to long-term processes of social policy development. In essence, Hacker pleaded for renewed efforts to build a new, comprehensive and coherent narrative about the development of the American welfare state that could incorporate studies about the influence of race, gender, business, and indirect methods such as taxation on the American state’s efforts to promote social policy goals without merely starting from the premise that the United States has had a “weak” state and trying to work backwards through time to explain why the American welfare state paled in comparison to those of Western Europe and Japan.

As of yet, no one has taken up the intimidating gauntlet demanding a more synthetic approach that Hacker threw down more than a decade ago. Instead, there has continued to be a fruitful cross-pollination between students of the American state and American social welfare. Perhaps spurred by the acrimonious debate surrounding the enactment of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, recent scholarship has revisited how earlier generations of reformers confronted a hostile array of opponents determined to undo attempts to restructure the American welfare state. In this line of inquiry, Michele Landis Dauber’s *The Sympathetic State*, like Theda Skocpol’s *Protecting Mothers and Soldiers*, extends the chronology of the American welfare state backwards into the nineteenth century. Unlike Skocpol, though, Dauber’s narrative shows how New Deal lawyers and

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47 Ibid., 128.
proponents marshalled a wealth of legal precedent and case law to defend the Social Security Act and other important pieces of New Deal legislation rather than emphasizing how the institutional legacy of largely forgotten programs like the Civil War veterans’ pension system hampered later efforts at social and political reform.

In sum, over the past fifteen years, there has been a remarkable revival of scholarly interest in both the American state as a subject worthy of study in its own right as well as the origins and development of the American welfare state, both public and private. I have tried to borrow and learn from the best insights and models that previous scholarship in these two fields has produced. Consequently, this dissertation is not a comprehensive history of any one particular government program like Social Security or Medicare, or historical profile of any single voluntary group like the American Association of Retired Persons, or biography of a single influential government official like former Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Wilbur Cohen. Instead, I have tried to meld together different elements in order to tell a necessarily selective story about how the attempts to create and later to reform public and private provision for old age economic security evolved from the 1930s to the 1970s.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

I have endeavored to organize *When Old Age Changed: Inventing the Senior State, 1935-1975* largely along chronological lines, though I have not always been rigidly dogmatic in doing so. In Chapter 1, entitled “Social Insecurities, 1925-1939,” I trace how the efforts of old-age pension advocates remained largely stalled until the onset of the Great Depression, when protracted economic crisis thrust the issue of old age economic insecurity into the center of American politics. For a variety of reasons, unlike in western European nations like Germany and the United Kingdom,

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the old-age pension movement remained peripheral to the concerns of most social reformers in the United States during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, no movement for a permanent universal old-age pension system at the national level emerged, and the few U.S. states which did develop old age pension systems were few in number and largely happy to leave such systems small and (usually) underfunded. In many U.S. states, the system of poorhouse relief which originally descended from Elizabethan-era Poor Laws in Tudor England remained more or less in effect, and the advocates who sought to reform this state of affairs found that their calls for change were met largely with indifference or opposition.

Instead, due to the historical weakness of the national American state in the realm of social welfare, the private sector emerged as the primary staging ground for debates, with private corporations largely taking the lead in formulating a distinctive welfare capitalism during the Progressive Era and into the 1920s, which sought to provide workers with benefits like old-age pensions as a gesture of paternalistic concern and obligation and to sap the appeal of labor unions to industrial workers. These efforts were more successful in some industries and in some individual companies than in others, but overall they were far from universal, especially for the millions of Americans who were not industrial workers. In much of the United States, old-age relief remained largely the province of local governments, mutual-aid societies, and in-kind family assistance. The relatively small and widely dispersed distribution of older Americans in the United States also helped to militate against the emergence of a national old-age pension movement.

The Great Depression entirely upended this state of affairs. Suddenly, individual states, which had previously shown marginal interest in devising old-age pension systems, now rushed to enact them as older Americans began to crowd and overburden the limited infrastructure of public poorhouses and rural county poor farms. In many instances, old-age pensions were justified as a way to preserve the “dignity” of older Americans and to update the social welfare infrastructure of
the United States to the standards that had become prevalent in much of the rest of the industrialized world. Reformers skillfully argued that pensions represented a more “modern” way to support older Americans, and that American society had progressed beyond the need for such punitive and retrograde institutions as the poorhouse. Such arguments proved to be persuasive in the context of the Great Depression. Strikingly, more individual states enacted old-age pension laws between 1929 and 1932 than had during the preceding thirty years, though many of these laws remained more declarations of sentiment rather than practicable steps to the actual eradication of the poorhouse as the primary public bulwark for destitute elderly and unemployed people.

Meanwhile, at the national level, efforts to create a new old-age pension system faltered. While proposals like the Dill-Connery bill, which was designed to help individual states defray the costs of old-age assistance, were debated on Capitol Hill, the Roosevelt administration chose a more restrained approach which would ensure that it, rather than Congress, would ultimately be in charge of the legislative process. Instead of using its considerable political capital to back proposals already circulating on Capitol Hill, the Roosevelt administration deferred the matter for further study and planning to the Committee on Economic Security, a presidentially-appointed board whose membership primarily consisted of academic experts who did not answer directly to Congress or other potential political rivals to the Roosevelt administration.

The delayed reaction of the Roosevelt administration to the growing social discontent among many older Americans, though, encouraged the emergence of popular alternative movements, the most prominent of which was the Townsend Movement in California, to seize the initiative and to press for an agenda (the Townsend Plan) centered on the enactment of a national system of universal, exceptionally generous, and non-contributory pensions for all older Americans. The Townsend Movement drew its strength from a core membership which largely consisted of native-born, white, Protestant middle-class citizens, and its appeal ran strongest and deepest in those parts
of the United States such as the rural Midwest and southern California where this group predominated in raw numbers (its appeal was decidedly lessened among white Southerners due to fears that the Townsend Plan would offer support to African-Americans).  

Despite these racial, ethnic, and geographic limitations, the supporters of the Townsend Plan (or “Townsendites”) frequently presented themselves as the true herald of all older Americans. This claim was not actually true, given the fact that the Townsend Movement’s core membership largely consisted of native-born, white, Christian, middle-class Americans residing in the Midwest and throughout the western United States, but as the sociologist Edwin Amenta has argued, the Townsend Movement “helped the elderly to see themselves as a national political group with legitimate needs and demands.”  

Despite widespread condemnation of the Townsend Plan as fiscally unviable, the Townsend Movement enjoyed significant and growing support in much of the nation, though its promise of universal eligibility regardless of race or gender stymied its popular appeal in much of the American South. The grassroots pressure from the Townsend Movement and other old-age advocacy groups helped to create the conditions necessary for the enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935, but the Townsend Movement’s ham-handed tactics allowed the Roosevelt administration to outmaneuver it and prevent the enactment of the Townsend Plan. The establishment of the Social Security system, though, did not immediately resolve the issue of providing economic security in old age, and the Townsend Movement continued to soldier on at the state and local level, hoping to regroup and wait for the right opportunity to press its agenda once more.


This opportunity never came, though, due to America’s entry into World War II and the return of a governing legislative coalition of southern Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill which steadfastly hostile to both the Townsend Plan and the Social Security program. Consequently, the fight over how to provide economic security in old age remained at an impasse, and would remain largely fixed in that position for the duration of the war. The return of full employment during the war and the end of Depression-era economic conditions temporarily dampened the appeal and strength of old-age pension advocacy groups, but the resumption of peace and the failure of Social Security at the national level to adequately accommodate the economic needs of older Americans began to reignite contentious fights at the state and local level over old age pensions. These fights were most pronounced in western states like California, Colorado, and Washington, where the Townsend Movement’s most important legacy had been to demonstrate that older people could be organized and mobilized behind the cause of publicly-supported, non-contributory old age pensions. While the Townsend Movement continued to exist in a loosely organized form after the end of World War II, its prewar example helped to motivate successor organizations like George McLain’s League of Senior Citizens in California to organize older Americans and to educate them to see themselves as a distinctive group in American society that merited special attention and assistance from the state.\textsuperscript{52}

In Chapter 2, “In Townsend’s Shadow: Reconstructing Old Age Security, 1939-1950,” I explore how this multifaceted struggle in a widening variety of different arenas – including but not limited to collective bargaining agreements, conflict between organized lobbying groups like the American Medical Association and federal officials produced a stalemate at the federal level, which increasingly led state and local officials, as well as private voluntary organizations, to explore and

develop solutions at the subnational level of government. In particular, welfare officials in New York City and the state of California proved to be among the most innovative in their approach to the issue of providing sufficient economic security to older Americans. State and local level fights over old-age pensions, as well as the mounting problems associated with the Social Security system catapulted the issue of old-age economic security to the forefront of the nation’s political life once more. Attempts to broaden the Social Security system made by organized labor did not succeed, and while unions like the United Auto Workers remained publicly committed to the expansion of Social Security to include all workers, they focused more energy on securing the benefits that would have come from an improved Social Security system via collective bargaining agreements.

For its part, corporate America acceded to the demands for improved pension and benefits in the belief that lightly regulated private pension systems would remain much more firmly under the sway of managerial prerogative than the public Social Security system, and also because corporate interest groups like the National Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce successfully persuaded individual employers that private benefits and pensions could be used as a tool to educate workers and gradually persuade them to be more sympathetic to corporate rather than organized labor’s side in collective bargaining disputes. Additionally, after the battle at the federal level in the late 1940s over the question of national health insurance resulted in a defeat for the advocates of a universal national health insurance program, these advocates adjusted their strategy and sought to enact universal national health insurance program solely for older Americans in the hope that such a program might one day be extended to all Americans.

In Chapter 3, “Adding Life to Years, 1950-1961,” I examine the tension between advocates of national health insurance for the elderly and officials within the Eisenhower administration who sought to erect an alternative framework for dealing with the economic problems of older Americans. This period witnessed the emergence of an uneasy alliance between advocates for
national health insurance and the coalition of local officials, social workers, and academic experts who argued in favor of expanded government services on behalf of the elderly. While efforts to enact national health insurance for the elderly became an increasingly prominent issue at the national level due to rising health costs and the paucity of affordable health insurance options for older people, other problems such as unaffordable housing, growing social isolation, and diminished employment opportunity became part of an expanding social agenda pursued at the state and local level by public officials and their partners in the private social welfare community. A new alliance which emphasized cooperative efforts between the public and private sector to address the problems of older people, with private philanthropies providing funding at the local level in New York City and elsewhere as local officials devised experimental programs to assist their elderly residents. These programs would later form the basis of future federal, state, and local state-building efforts once the federal government began to fund existing programs and promote the creation of new local programs after 1965. This development owed much to the gradual expansion of the Social Security system during the 1940s, which prevented Social Security from becoming a more fully-fledged social welfare system capable of solely providing economic security to older people.

As a result, older people turned to other existing sources of public assistance, a development which upended political affairs in numerous states and cities and helped highlight the inadequacy of old-age relief in the United States. The growing financial costs of supporting older people helped to build public support for new government programs to subsidize the financial risks and costs of old-age, with Medicare emerging as the preferred solution due to the relatively high costs associated with medical care in old age. Eventually, rising costs forged an alliance between academic and government experts and newly created old-age interest groups which sought to organize the elderly and apply sufficient pressure on the Congress and the Eisenhower administration to support the
enactment of Medicare, a policy solution which enjoyed substantial support because it promised to address rising health costs for America’s growing older population.

In Chapter 4, “The War on Elderly Poverty, 1961-1966,” I investigate the efforts by officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administration to develop a more effective apparatus at the federal level to deal with the economic and social problems of older Americans. These efforts both preceded and intersected with the War on Poverty announced by President Johnson in January 1964, and were marked by protracted internal struggles as differing federal agencies and officials warred over how to best address the topic of elderly poverty. Ultimately, while a new set of federal programs and agencies were created with the explicit purpose of dealing with elderly poverty, these efforts remained piecemeal in comparison to efforts expended on behalf of Medicare and Medicaid. By focusing on providing health insurance coverage on a universal basis to senior citizens, Johnson administration officials hoped to eradicate elderly poverty and to relieve the mounting fiscal pressure placed by rising elderly poverty rates upon local and state governments as well as individual families, which threatened to completely subsume other social welfare priorities.

Efforts to focus the Office of Economic Opportunity to devote more resources in the War on Poverty to combatting elderly poverty, though, were far less successful, despite mounting criticism of the War on Poverty’s conduct and aims. Frustrated by the unresponsiveness of the OEO, congressional critics latched onto the Older Americans Act as an alternative mechanism for funding local and state-level efforts to combat elderly poverty and to coordinate federal efforts in this field, but their efforts to strengthen federal efforts via the Older Americans Act’s Administration on Aging met with indifference and disinterest on the part of the Johnson administration, which shared their goal of reducing elderly poverty but not their enthusiasm for the Administration on Aging.

In Chapter 5 “Entitled But No Longer Pitied, 1966-1975,” I examine how, after the successful implementation of Medicare and Medicaid, Johnson administration officials shifted focus
and began to explore additional ways in which the federal government could be used to improve the lives of older Americans. Partly, these efforts were in response to lower-profile issues like age discrimination by private employers, but they also reflected an effort by the administration to reformulate the increasingly controversial War on Poverty in a manner that would be more politically viable. Beginning in 1966, the Johnson administration recruited outside experts to serve on newly-formed Executive branch task forces. The administration then used these task forces to formulate and drive the development of new policies and programs which it believed would enjoy sufficient social and political support in order to be sustainable over the long-term.

However, these efforts were stymied by the administrative chaos which frequently resulted from the continuing conflicts among differing federal agencies and departments and the competing goals that the Johnson administration sought to accomplish. Some initiatives – primarily those which aimed to replicate social roles for older Americans or to sustain their overall health – were enacted, but broader reforms which would have unduly interfered with existing labor market conditions were placed to the side. After wading through a morass of proposals and significant internal dissension, the Johnson administration ultimately chose to improve the existing Social Security system, and to lay the groundwork for potentially more radical and universal reforms to the chaotic structure of the nation’s chaotic social welfare system such as guaranteed annual income for families and individuals at or near the federal poverty level.

The Johnson administration’s tentative explorations of guaranteed annual income were, somewhat surprisingly, picked up by the incoming Nixon administration in 1969. Though the administration’s embrace of a guaranteed annual income plan was born in part from its hostility to Social Security’s Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – more commonly labeled as “welfare” and other government programs which it perceived to be unduly solicitous of “undeserving” members of American society – officials within the Nixon administration believed
that they had a rare opportunity to radically restructure social welfare policy in the United States. The signature policy goal sought by the administration was the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which would have replaced much of the nation’s existing patchwork of social welfare programs with a new guaranteed annual income program.

An unusual right-left coalition prevented the enactment of FAP, though, and instead the Nixon administration secured significant, lasting improvements to the Social Security system which included the creation of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) plan. SSI was a scaled down version of FAP that provided income assistance to impoverished elderly people (its original targeted primary audience). These efforts signaled a consolidation of the senior state at the federal level, as they demonstrated the federal government’s willingness to support and expand public assistance to older people even as it tried to consign the War on Poverty’s signature Community Action Programs to a bureaucratic scrapheap. In line with its goal of devolving political power from the federal government back to the states, the Nixon administration also greatly amplified the amount of funding that the Older Americans Act had provided to various state and local programs, thus solidifying the cooperative alliance between federal, state, and local officials which had begun to take shape three decades prior.

Finally, I conclude by briefly examining the fate of the senior state since the mid-1970s. While other parts of the American welfare state – most notably, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program – have been repealed or otherwise subject to withering cuts, the programs and initiatives for older Americans have remained largely intact. While this outcome owes much to the emergence of well-funded lobbying organizations like the AARP and their ability to protect existing programs and promote new ones, the senior state owed its existence to more than the presence of increasingly mobilized older voters or well-organized interest groups to lobby on its behalf. After all, the Townsend Movement had successfully educated and persuaded older
Americans during the 1930s to see themselves as uniquely deserving of a generous old-age pension to be supplied by the federal government, but attempts to convert this grassroots mobilization into the Townsend Movement’s desired outcome had repeatedly failed at the national level, and its ultimate goal of a universal, generous, guaranteed monthly pension for all older Americans regardless of gender, race, or other backgrounds was never enacted.

Though the Townsend Movement failed, it left behind an important legacy: it had organized thousands of older people, perhaps for the first time, to demand government action on their behalf. Ironically, the old-age advocacy and interest groups which followed in its wake during the 1940s, 1950s, and into the 1960s were made possible because the Townsend Movement had failed. Many of the same drivers of social and economic insecurity that had unexpectedly propelled the Townsend Movement to nationwide importance had merely been exposed by the Great Depression, and would remain at work long after the Depression had ended in the early 1940s.

Rather, the senior state owed both its design and its longevity to the larger needs of American society as it evolved over the course of the twentieth century. As the nation transitioned from an agricultural and rural society to an industrial and urban society during the course of the twentieth century, the effects of such dislocation became apparent first in New England and the Great Plains, two areas that witnessed a significant outmigration of residents. These changes disrupted existing family patterns as younger and more able-bodied people left rural communities, which then found themselves increasingly bereft of the traditional sources of in-kind family assistance which had formerly existed to support older generations. As younger workers left

53 In 1900, the ten states with the highest proportion of older citizens (defined as people of 65 years age or more) in their population were largely concentrated in New England, the Midwest, and the West Coast: Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Nevada, California, Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. In 1950, this geographic distribution had remained fairly constant, with states in New England and Midwest accounting once more for the highest proportion of older citizens. The ten states with the highest proportion of older citizens in 1950 were New Hampshire, Vermont, Iowa, Missouri, Maine, Kansas, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Indiana, Minnesota. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Demographic Trends in the Twentieth Century: Census 2000 Special Reports* by Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, https://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf, pg. 61, accessed February 24, 2017).
agricultural communities, traditional systems of old-age relief like county poor farms and poorhouses proved to be increasingly inadequate to meet the demands placed on them. The decline of American agriculture also lessened the employment opportunities for older people in rural communities and further isolated them, even as significantly longer lifespans meant that there was a growing mass population of older people that had not previously existed.54

As rural communities entered an accelerated pattern of long-term demographic decline, urban flight helped to concentrate poverty in American cities, especially for older people who lacked adequate financial resources to move to nearby suburbs but who now found themselves increasingly isolated from younger family members who had already done so. Additionally, the population of older Americans – both in absolute terms and relative to the rest of the general U.S. population – had risen considerably since the onset of the twentieth century.55 In cities like New York and Chicago, elderly poverty was already becoming an issue of concern by the end of World War II, and suburban white flight in the decades that followed the end of the war further exacerbated this issue. Increasingly, state and local officials found it necessary to develop new programs which would re-integrate older people back into the communities in which they lived.

In order to develop these programs, officials turned to academic researchers and private social welfare agencies, and thereby helped forge a new cooperative partnership that united the public and private sectors. This partnership was already nascent in 1950 at the first National

54 In 1900, the average U.S. life expectancy at birth was 47 years. By 1950, this figure had risen to 68 years. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Sixty-Five Plus in the United States,” https://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/statbriefs/agebrief.html, (accessed February 24, 2017). As Herbert S. Klein observes, “mortality rates began to fall in the last decades of the 19th century but then started to decline at an unprecedented pace. This trend was spearheaded by a precipitous drop in deaths from infectious diseases…the result of this change in traditional morality was a steady and rapid rise in life expectancy for every new generation born in this period.” See Herbert S. Klein, A Population History of the United States, 2nd ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 129.

55 In 1900, the total population of older people in the United States (defined by the U.S. Census as age 65 and over) was 3.1 million, or 1/25 (4.1%) of total U.S. population. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Sixty-Five Plus in the United States,” https://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/statbriefs/agebrief.html (accessed February 24, 2017). By 1950, the population of older people in the United States was 12.3 million, which was 8.1% of the total U.S. population.
Conference on Aging; subsequent national, regional, and state conferences over the course of the next twenty years would further cement and solidify into a coherent bloc.

As this grouping of public and private welfare officials became better organized and well-defined, so, too, did the overarching task that they faced: namely, to leverage the resources of government and the expertise of private experts at the local, state, and finally federal levels to expand the amount of public assistance available to older Americans, but to do so in a manner that did not risk running afoul of the nation’s historically skeptical attitude towards support for groups or classes of its citizens seen as “undeserving.” While older Americans may have been viewed as “deserving” in the eyes of some social reformers, that sympathy was not sufficient to secure enactment of the Townsend Plan, nor was it sufficient to ensure that state-level old-age pensions enacted in western states like California and Colorado during the 1930s and 1940s would go unchallenged.

Starting in the late 1940s and extending into the early 1950s, reformers sought a new way that would enable them to provide needed government services to older people without risking still-potent fears that old-age pensions represented a potential corruption of American democracy. The solution they devised – in conjunction with their colleagues in private social welfare organizations as well as academia – was to emphasize social services rather than generous old-age pensions, and to provide services that might have been previously provided by private families. This formulation provided a modicum of protection to older, at-risk persons, created and fueled continuing demand for a new generation of social workers, gerontologists, and other experts on the problems of older people, and did so in a manner that did so in a manner which did not seriously impinge upon existing distributions of power or wealth within the United States. Ultimately, it produced a unique welfare state structure that was far more solicitous of the needs and demands of older people than it was of other needy groups, but which still did not provide true economic and social security for
many older Americans, despite the best intentions and high hopes of its original architects. How this structure came into being is the story that I wish to tell in these pages.
CHAPTER I
Social Insecurities, 1929-1939

Between 1929 and 1939, the issue of individual economic security in old age moved to the center of American politics and society. Fueled by the record mass unemployment and social discontent that the Great Depression had engendered, individual states, corporate employers, private advocacy organizations, and the federal government grappled over the question of how to best support a small but growing population of older and impoverished people. During the three decades prior to the Great Depression, this issue, by widespread social consensus, had remained largely out of the public realm. A combination of broadly inherited suspicions about the nature of centralized governmental power, fragmented governmental authority, and long-standing beliefs about the nature of public assistance and its recipients militated strongly against limited and unsuccessful efforts during the Progressive Era to fashion a new national order or consensus.¹ Instead, old-age economic security remained nearly the exclusive provenance of private welfare or philanthropic organizations, individual families, and mutual-aid societies.² Despite the pointed arguments of some social reformers that the United States had fallen behind other western industrialized nations like the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada in how it approached the issue of old-age economic security, these criticisms remained confined within small circles of academic and social welfare experts.

The Great Depression fundamentally challenged this state of affairs. Large portions of the existing but fragmented private social welfare system buckled and collapsed under the unprecedented duress of prolonged economic crisis and social instability. As the Depression deepened and worsened, individual states, led by New York State, rushed to enact public old-age pension programs in the hope that providing a modicum of financial assistance to their older, usually male unemployed workers would spare them the indignities of the public poorhouse or from becoming dependent upon their children and extended families. As a consequence of the Depression, public assistance for older workers gained a new social and political legitimacy, and this fundamental shift represented the beginnings of the senior state that would evolve over the course of the next four decades. Moreover, the pattern set in the 1930s would be repeated again during the 1940s, the 1950s, and into the 1960s. As the needs of older people changed, new solutions would be devised primarily at the local and state level, sometimes in response to popular grassroots pressure and organizing, and sometimes as a result of proactive measures taken by social welfare officials to investigate and survey the actual living conditions and economic needs of older people.

The specific economic and social conditions of the 1930s, though, forged the initial character of the senior state, and its emphasis on addressing economic insecurity. Surveying the failure and inability of existing private and public institutions to effectively provide a sustainable model of economic security in old age, public officials soon found themselves confronted by the

prospect of organized social discontent that seemingly threatened to radically rearrange existing balances of power and wealth in American society. Their response – the Social Security Act – represented a compromise between competing interests on Capitol Hill, and its two major titles related to economic insecurity in old age sought to simultaneously bolster state-level efforts while also carving out a new role for the federal government to play in providing individual economic security in old age through collective effort.

The Social Security Act only partially fulfilled its main goal of supplying broad-based economic security, though, because of the limited scope of categories of workers eligible for inclusion under its old-age insurance program and because of largely successful efforts by its opponents to permit it to be broadened and expanded further. Consequently, the half-finished scaffolding erected by the Social Security Act failed to adequately resolve the issue of economic insecurity in old-age for many Americans, and compelled other institutional actors within American society – especially state and local officials in conjunction with a resurgent private welfare sector – to take a more proactive role in developing solutions that could preserve the dignity of older people without threatening fiscal insolvency and the ability of states and local communities to provide needed services and assistance to other groups.

Despite the limitations of Social Security, the incipient senior state benefitted from the law’s infusion of federal funds, which supplemented existing state-level public welfare administration infrastructure and laid the groundwork for future expansion of public efforts to assess how the needs of older people could best be handled. The Social Security Board’s annual reports would also serve a crucial role in supplying vital information about the program’s recipients, which would help to guide future decision-making processes. In essence, the enactment of Social Security defined the parameters for subsequent debate around the issue of economic security in old age. The senior state owed its existence to the enactment of Social Security, and future initiatives to expand government
involvement in providing economic security and other forms of public provision to older Americans would, by necessity, have to wrestle with its incomplete legacy.

**The Second Annual Meeting of the National Conference on Old-Age Security**

In a short article published in its April 21, 1929 edition, the *New York Times* reported on the upcoming second annual meeting of the National Conference on Old-Age Security, which was scheduled to be held on April 26, 1929 in New York. The meeting promised to bring together a wide variety of speakers on the subject of old-age security, a topic which had become the lifework of Abraham Epstein, the National Conference on Old-Age Security’s founder.⁴ Indeed, everyone who had gathered at the Community Church on Park Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street in New York City for the conference likely believed there was a pressing need for old-age security, but that was probably the totality of their agreement. Even in the radiant prosperity of 1920s America, there was a growing recognition in both the private and public sectors of American life that while abject poverty persisted, millenarian hopes for its abolition might yet be fulfilled.⁵ The question, therefore, was not whether collective efforts needed to be undertaken to address the problem of elderly impoverishment, but rather what shape and form those efforts should take. In April 1929, no satisfactory answer to that question was obvious, or at least it was not evident to the men and women who had gathered for the day to discuss the subject under the Community Church’s resplendent Victorian Romanesque flying buttresses and vaulted ceiling.

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⁵ To take but one example: Herbert Hoover, who had been elected President in November 1928 and who was inaugurated a mere seven weeks before the conference, had campaigned on a sincere and deeply-held promise and belief that it was possible to extinguish poverty. In a 1928 campaign speech, for example, Hoover had argued that “by adherence to the principles of decentralized self-government, ordered liberty, equal opportunity, and freedom to the individual, our American experiment in human welfare has yielded a degree of well-being unparalleled in the world. It has come nearer to the abolition of poverty, to the abolition of fear of want, than humanity has ever reached before. Progress of the past seven years is proof of it...” See Glen Jeansonne, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Fighting Quaker, 1928-1933* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29.
The conference attendees could scarcely be blamed, though, for their inability to produce anything other than a bland consensus. Given the diverse variety of fields they represented, such as (but not limited to) organized religion, municipal government, and the labor movement, it was perhaps a minor miracle that the conference had been able to get them to gather under one roof. Some of the attendees, like Thomas Kennedy of the United Mine Workers of America, represented the nation’s besieged labor movement; some, like Frances Perkins of the New York State Department of Labor, served as the ambassadors of still-curious and uncommitted state and local governments; and others, like Bishop Francis J. McConnell, bore witness as the last stewards of the Social Gospel, a once-fiery movement which had roared out of America’s churches at the turn of the twentieth century and demanded the amelioration of social injustices of an industrial capitalist order, but which now burned slowly and dimly on its last dying embers.

Notably absent from the conference were any attendees from the many powerful corporations based in New York, many of whose Midtown Manhattan headquarters were within an easy walk of the Community Church. Corporate America was not alone in its absence, though. Also missing were any official emissaries from the newly-inaugurated administration of President Herbert Hoover. Such absences were not unintentional. In its brief preview of the conference, the New York Times reported that U.S. Secretary of Labor James J. Davis had sent a noncommittal letter to the attendees which broadly “endors[ed] the movement to secure pensions for the aged,” but which made no promise of succor or action on the part of the Hoover administration to that end.6

The relative apathy with which the Hoover administration treated the conference, though, was not solely the product of indifference on the part of the President or the federal government more generally. In truth, it reflected deeper ambivalences which had long-marked the manner in

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which public relief had been dispensed in the United States. For example, a “solution” to the “pressing need of old-age security” which the National Conference on Old-Age Security sought to address already existed – and had for quite some time. That solution was the municipal poorhouse and its rural cousin the county poor farm, both of which were long-established and well-known features on the American landscape. As the late Michael Katz observed, “throughout the century before the New Deal, the poorhouse dominated the structure of welfare – or, as it was called then, relief…. [and] American welfare has remained within the shadow of the poorhouse.” Like their counterparts in Elizabethan and later Victorian England, American poorhouses (or almshouses) were designed to be unwelcoming places, in order to ensure that whomever was sheltered within their walls would not wish to remain terribly long. By offering living conditions that were scarcely better than begging and sleeping in filthy refuse-encrusted streets, many nineteenth century reformers believed the morality of poor and working-class individuals would be sustained and uplifted through honest work rather than permanently corrupted by dishonorable idleness which misguided public charity supposedly enabled and sustained.

The notoriously poor conditions of poorhouses occasionally led elderly people to take extreme measures to avoid ending up in them. In June 1887, for example, the New York Times reported that an elderly couple residing in Union Hill, New Jersey (now part of Union City, New Jersey), had committed suicide rather than being “removed to the County Almshouse at Snake Hill.” While the New Jersey dual suicide was an extreme case, it spoke to the dread of many older people at ending up as impoverished residents of public poorhouses. Nevertheless, the poorhouse aimed to replace the traditional publicly

8 See “An Aged Couple Gone: Two Nonagenarians Take Poison to Escape the Almshouse,” The New York Times, June 1, 1887. More recently, the legal historian Hendrik Hartog has written a brief but penetrating legal history of the frequently complex financial arrangements which older people sometimes undertook in conjunction with younger family members in order to avoid such fates in his Someday All This Will Be Yours: A History of Inheritance and Old Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).
supported “outdoor relief” system in which direct assistance was provided to needy individuals, a method of supplying relief that many nineteenth century reformers had long decried as too expensive and ineffective at arresting poverty and preventing its contagious spread among working class people.

Yet alongside its function as a deterrent to sloth among the poor and working class, the poorhouse was also designed to serve a more charitable function of sheltering orphans, the mentally insane, the elderly, and other individuals who could no longer work. These twin missions of deterrence and compassion may have been compatible at some early point, but by the mid- to late nineteenth century most American poorhouses had largely shifted in favor of deterrence, despite the fact that the poorhouse as an institution had also failed in its mission to replace outdoor relief, which persisted in many localities throughout the United States.

Perhaps nowhere was this ambivalence about public welfare and its functions truer than in New York City and its environs, which daily blended the splendors of a technologically superior industrial order with the shocking squalor of extreme human deprivation. Jacob Riis’s photographs of New York’s Lower East Side neighborhood had scandalized the nation when they were first published at the turn of the twentieth century, and the intervening three decades between their publication and the slow coalescing of institutions and individuals which had brought forth the National Conference on Old-Age Security had witnessed at best only modestly successful attempts to improve the living conditions of the city’s poor, especially its elderly poor, who not infrequently discovered that the municipal almshouse on Blackwell (now Roosevelt) Island to be their one and only option of last resort when they could no longer afford to keep the landlord or the bill collector at bay.

It was precisely this problem – the inadequacy of the public poorhouse to meet its stated aim of providing real, meaningful financial security in old age without humiliating those who dwelled
within its walls – that had brought together the assembled attendees of the National Conference on Old-Age. But it was also the determined efforts of Abraham Epstein, the passionate founder of the American Association for Old Age Security, who had long pined for the United States to take the sort of decisive and positive actions in the realm of social welfare which he believed best characterized the most civilized nations of western Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Described by his most recent biographer as “an intense little man,” Epstein had committed himself to the cause of old-age pensions with the fanatical devotion of a true believer.  

To this end, he had spent nearly his entire life savings in order to start and get the American Association for Old Age Security organization up and running, and had also spent a considerable amount of time forging working relationships with New York’s well-established private charities, voluntary societies, and religious groups committed to alleviating the plight of the city’s poor. The annual conferences, which the American Association for Old Age Security sponsored in the late 1920s, were very much his brainchild, but their gradually increasing prominence in New York’s reform circles suggested that the cause of old-age security was not solely the vanity project of a single man.

Indeed, New York’s deeply-rooted system of private welfare and philanthropic organizations was already well aware of the limited ability (and perhaps limited desire) to minister to the city’s poor, even if they preferred not to publicly acknowledge it too loudly or too frequently. The New York branch of the international Charity Organization Society, for example, kept detailed records on the many families (including numerous elderly denizens) sprinkled throughout the city’s poorest neighborhoods, and its case workers meticulously tracked and commented upon the impoverished

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10 Ibid.
individuals they encountered on a day-to-day basis. Such social work activities were hardly limited to New York City. Other American cities in the Midwest and New England also featured a growing density of voluntary societies dedicated to the eradication of poverty in their midst. Abraham Epstein’s work to drive and build attention for the cause of old-age security was therefore hardly original, though his efforts did have the salutary effect of encouraging a traditionally fragmented community of private welfare and charitable organizations to begin to see the benefits of setting aside doctrinal and territorial disputes in order to coordinate with each other. Though neither Epstein nor the other attendees at the 1929 conference could have possibly predicted it, their efforts to build public support for reforming old-age security in the United States would, in just a few short months, receive the devoted attention of officials from across the nation.

If the numerous charities, mutual aid societies, and other private organizations in New York remained at an impasse on the question of how best to reform old-age security in the United States, such vacillation was markedly absent in the upper echelons of corporate American management. Awash in both confidence and capital, the masters of Wall Street betrayed no vexing qualms over how best to solve the problem of old age poverty. Speaking in June 1925 at the Colorado Bankers’ Association, William E. Knox, the President of the American Bankers’ Association, publicly


12 By contrast, five years later, Eleanor Roosevelt would give the keynote address at a February 1934 meeting of the American Association for Old Age Security’s Washington, D.C. branch, as clear an indication as any of the significantly improved fortunes and importance of the association. See Eleanor Roosevelt, “A Speech Before the D.C. Branch of the American Association for Social Security, the Council of Social Agencies, and the Monday Evening Club,” Speech, American Association for Social Security, Washington D.C., February 8th, 1934. Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, The George Washington University. Available at: https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/old-age-pensions-speech-de-branch-american-association-social-security-council-social-agencies-and (accessed September 21, 2016). See also Speech and Article File, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. In her remarks to the group, the First Lady observed “I do not feel that I have to discuss the merits of old age pensions with my audience. We have come beyond that because it is many years now since we have accepted the fact, I think, pretty well throughout the country, that it is the right of old people when they have worked hard all their lives, and, through no fault of theirs, have not been able to provide for their old age, to be cared for in the last years of their life. We did it at first in what I consider a terrible way – through poorhouses – but now we have become more humane and more enlightened, and little by little we are passing old age pension laws in the various states.” (Ibid.)
decried the “old age pensions and other forms of charitable compensation” sponsored by well-meaning (and unspecified) industrial corporations to support retired workers.\textsuperscript{13} Instead, Knox pointedly argued that “in principle, they [the pensions] are wrong and contrary to the purposes of democracy…what we want is an organized plan that will direct working people toward independence, and no system of industry can lay claim to complete success that does not contemplate the financial independence of every employee.”\textsuperscript{14} More specifically, Knox emphasized the need for American employees to have “a broad cooperative plan for systematic saving” – an unsurprising stand, perhaps, from the leader of a major trade association for savings banks, but one which encapsulated widely-held public sentiments on the subject. As Knox suggested in his remarks, old-age pensions were “contrary to the purposes of democracy,” an oblique reference to the scandals associated with the pensions granted to Civil War veterans in the decades after the war’s formal conclusion in 1865.

As Theda Skocpol argued in her \textit{Protecting Soldiers and Mothers}, the disproportionately generous expansion of old-age pensions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had successfully welded aging northern Civil War veterans to the electoral apparatus of the Republican Party in many key Northern states such as Indiana and Ohio.\textsuperscript{15} Such a combination had helped to secure the Republican Party’s dominance of the nation’s politics for the first half-century after the Civil War, a fact made all the more obvious by the long, unending parade of largely interchangeable Republican Party functionaries and middlemen who occupied high offices at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. This politically fecund union between veterans and the Republican Party, though, had come at the high price of fatefully damaging old-age pensions as a cause célèbre for

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
social reformers. Indeed, in the eyes of many Progressive reformers in the United States who, during
the first decades of the early twentieth century, sought to dislodge the patronage-laced “state of
courts and parties” (to employ the political scientist Stephen Skowronek’s phrase) which had
existed continuously in one form or another since the deeply divisive days of Andrew Jackson’s
administration, old-age pensions were nothing less than corruption of the democratic process writ
large.16

Fatefully, unlike the drive for workmen’s compensation laws, women’s suffrage, or the
temperance movement, the push for national old-age pensions never attracted the depth or breadth
of institutional and popular support sufficient to cross the many constitutional barriers in its path.
While some largely rural, lightly populated, and not especially wealthy states like Kentucky and
Nevada had, at least on paper, committed themselves to the cause of old-age pensions for their
citizens, in reality, such mandates remained unfunded and unloved, the perennial budgetary
stepchildren of more than one state legislature and the recipient of constant attention only from
devotees like Abraham Epstein.17 Important industrialized states like Massachusetts – a traditional
state-level spearhead of social and political reform – had commissioned investigations to evaluate
the merits of state-provided old-age pensions, but had ultimately remained happily uncommitted on

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16 Stephen Skowronek, Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-
1920. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), see 24-46. As one typical example of the extensive newspaper
coverage of the scandals surrounding the Civil War veterans’ pensions revealed, there were by 1894 “more pensions
than soldiers” – i.e., the number of elderly men on the pension rolls exceeded the sum total of soldiers in the U.S.
military during the course of the war. See “More Pensions than Soldiers: Government Defrauded of Millions of
17 Epstein remained evangelically committed to the cause of public old-age pensions, and was a not infrequent letter
writer to The New York Times on behalf of this cause. See for example, Abraham Epstein, “Caring for the Aged: State
Program Might Help Solve an Unemployment Problem,” The New York Times, November 8, 1927. As late as 1931, old-
age pension laws existed in twelve states, but “in only 137 counties of nine states have they been adopted,” with average
monthly payments of $14.32 to each elderly recipient ($226.71 in 2016 dollars); the total number of elderly persons who
received pensions stood at just 10,307.
the subject, and were largely content to let the issue be resolved by either local municipalities or by the mysterious machinations of the labor market.18

The combination of popular and elite disinterest in old-age pensions remained alive and well long after the number of Civil War veteran pensioners had dwindled to statistical insignificance. The New York Times could editorialize in June 1927 – sixty-two years after the end of the Civil War – that “the so-called old-age non-contributory several States are not strictly pensions but are simply another form of public relief – outdoor relief instead of institutional relief.”19 Such public relief efforts, the Times observed, were “not stipends to which specific services in the past give claim,” nor were “they offered even in return for a general social contribution by the recipient.”20 Yet even the Times could sense that something was wrong with the poorhouse as the last refuge of the elderly. Observing in the same editorial that “poorhouses have become, for the most part, homes for the aged,” and the consignment of the elderly to such institutions was to effectively abandon them to

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18 In 1924 the state government of Massachusetts had authorized the creation of a “Commission on Old Age Pensions,” which then promptly spent the next two years studying and debating how to best reform the “system of caring for the aged in Massachusetts.” The Commission’s final report emphasized “a widespread lack of means in old age” but “disagreed as to the remedy,” and therefore could offer no definitive singular recommended solution to the Massachusetts legislature. See Richard K. Conant, “Care of the Aged Poor - Proposed Measures for Improving The Care Of The Aged In Massachusetts,” (presentation given at the National Conference Of Social Work’s Fifty-Third Annual Session, Cleveland, Ohio, May 26-June 2, 1926). Source URL: http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/public-welfare/care-of-the-aged-poor/ (Accessed July 17, 2016). See also Winthrop D. Lane, “Old-Age Pension Laws: Three More States Join Those Providing for Home Care of Indigent Persons,” The New York Times, May 19, 1929, in which Mr. Lane in a letter to the editor of the Times observed that three states (Minnesota, Utah, and Wyoming) had recently enacted old-age pension bills, thus bringing the total number of U.S. states with such pensions in place to nine. Gregory Wood has argued that the 1920s state-level pension movement may have been motivated by a growing belief among social reformers and some unionist groups that old-age pensions represented a way to legitimize social provision for older male workers. See Gregory Wood, Retiring Men, 60-61. In the particular case of Massachusetts, Brian Gratton has argued that the opposition of social workers in that state helped to prevent the enactment of a state old-age pension system. See Brian Gratton, “Social Workers and Old Age Pensions,” Social Service Review 57, no. 3 (1983): 403-15. Additionally, the Fraternal Order of Eagles, the American Association for Labor Legislation, as well as labor federations in some states appear to have been the main backers of state-level old-age pension movements during the 1920s. See Ana Shola Orloff, The Politics of Pensions: A Comparative Analysis of Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1880–1940 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 282.
20 Ibid.
“the callous neglect of dehumanized poorhouses,” the Times held out hope that some kind of better-designed pension system might break the cycle of elderly poverty in the future.21

If the Times was hoping that a satisfactory answer to the question of eliminating elderly poverty would soon present itself, it did not have to look very far beyond the environs of the great corporate headquarters littered throughout Manhattan. In the first decade after the end of World War I, employer-sponsored welfare plans had spread throughout the industrial and commercial sectors of the American economy. The expansion of these plans reflected in part the unprecedented weakness of the American labor movement at this moment in time. But they also depended upon an environment of sustained economic growth, which would enable companies to promise future pensions contingent to a good extent on present-day profits.

The halting of economic growth during the Great Depression which began in 1929, though, upset this increasingly precarious financial house of cards for many companies.22 The business community, which had formerly embraced welfare capitalism partly as a method to limit the appeal of unions to their workforces and partly out of a sense of social responsibility on the part of some corporate leaders, now dispensed with such initiatives in a time of economic crisis and growing mass unemployment.23 Faced with the prospect of having to provide ruinously expensive financial support to armies of newly unemployed workers, formerly benevolent businessmen now increasingly heard liability instead of responsibility whenever the subject of pensions was broached.

22 As Robert Zieger has written, “economic catastrophe changed the equation…the collapse of advanced commercial and welfare capitalism transformed the nature of the bargain that…industrial workers had accepted. The devastating impact of the Great Depression soon overwhelmed even the most conscientious efforts of employers and government officials to maintain employment and wage levels. By 1931, welfare capitalism was in full retreat. By 1933, fully one-quarter of the working population was unemployed.” See Robert Zieger, The CIO, 1935-1955 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 13.
in public. In short, the rapidly changing economic circumstances in depression-era America helped propel a dramatic shift in the financial calculus of many corporate leaders, who rapidly began to distance and sever themselves from any sense of social obligation to their benighted former charges.24

Instead, as John Edgerton, the president of the National Association of Manufacturers in 1930, observed,

[t]he real responsibility for their [the unemployed] poverty…lay with the jobless themselves. “If,” he [Edgerton] asked, “they do not…practice the habits of thrift and conservation, or if they gamble away their savings in the stock market or elsewhere, is our economic system, or government, or industry to blame?”25

Edgerton’s argument that poverty and unemployment was the fault of the individual failings enjoyed wide purchase in the United States, and it was not until the onset of double-digit unemployment during the Great Depression that it began to be challenged. While mass unemployment metastasized into a dangerous, cancerous growth on the nation’s body politic during the first four years of the Depression, perhaps no group of Americans experienced firsthand the perils of desperate unemployment and unwelcome destitution in a more pronounced fashion than millions of older people, many of whom confronted a world in which their life savings had been permanently erased, their employment terminated, and their prospects for individual economic salvation to be precarious at best.

As the Depression deepened and economic recovery seemed more and more a mirage, the underpinnings of social stability in the United States started to come undone. William Leuchtenburg has further observed that “many believed that the long era of economic growth in the western world

had come to an end…[f]or the first time in three centuries, the curve of American population growth was leveling off; an economy accustomed to the demand of a swiftly expanding population would have to adapt itself painfully to a stationary population.”

Chief among those who were stationary were older workers, who now found that a shrinking economy and empty public and private coffers afforded them precious little protection from life’s darkening vicissitudes. The 1932 presidential election reflected this growing social discontent and the deeply unsettled political conditions in the United States.

Without having to delve too deeply into policy specifics or proposals while on the campaign trail, Franklin Roosevelt, like Herbert Hoover before him four years prior, was carried into the Oval Office courtesy of an electoral tidal wave. While older Americans were not yet characterized as a distinct voting “bloc” (as they would be by the 1936 election), it seems reasonable to presume that many, like their fellow citizens, opted to take a chance on the New York Governor with the famous last name rather than remain bound to the failed presidency of Herbert Hoover. In the “interregnum of despair” between the November 1932 election and Roosevelt’s scheduled

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26 Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 29. For every decade between 1900 and 1990, the average annual growth rate of the population aged 65 years or older exceeded that of the total population. This disparity was most pronounced during the Depression decade of 1930-1940, when the temporary dip in fertility as a result of economic crisis produced an average annual growth rate of 0.75% for the total population but an average annual growth rate of 3.1% for the population aged 65 years or older. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, by Loraine A. West, Samantha Cole, Daniel Goodkind, and Wan He, 65+ in the United States: 2010, Figure 1.2, “Average Annual Growth Rate of the Total Population and Population Aged 65 and Over by Decade: 1900–1910 to 2040–2050,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, June 2014), 7. Available at: https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p23-212.pdf, accessed March 1, 2017.

inauguration in March 1933, older Americans began to write the Roosevelts in the hope that they might be able to help, and to plead for some sort of government action on their behalf.  

Franklin Roosevelt and New York State’s Response to the Great Depression

Their belief that their worries would now find a sympathetic hearing in Washington, D.C., may have been informed by Roosevelt’s modest record of state-level action on behalf of older people while in Albany. As Governor, Roosevelt had taken an unusually strong interest in old age insurance as a solution to the mounting problem of poverty and dependency among New York’s thousands of older citizens, many of whom had found themselves among the first casualties of the Great Depression’s onslaught. Even before Roosevelt had become Governor of New York, though, there were numerous indications at the state level that a new public consensus was beginning to build in favor of public pensions as a needed social reform to replace “antiquated” state almshouses. During the 1920s, the New York Legislature had repeatedly considered bills to do so, and important institutions like The New York Times had offered wholehearted support to such efforts. In late September 1929, the New York Commission on Old Age Security, a special investigative body consisting of a select group of state legislators, heard numerous witnesses testify that “neither private charity nor group insurance and industrial pensions were adequate to cope with

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29 As Daniel Rodgers observes, “New York State had long been the cockpit of the social insurance battles; most of the major clearinghouses of social welfare ideas were headquartered there. Even as blithe a young progressive as Roosevelt could not keep them altogether out of his formative air. To this one must add Roosevelt’s instinctual fiscal conservatism, to which the contributory aspects of social insurance were, from the first, congenial. He had been severely disappointed as governor when a special New York commission in 1930 had recommended tax-financed pensions for the elderly poor rather than a self-financing system of contributory old-age insurance.” (Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings, 438). See also “Roosevelt Starts Old Age Aid Study: Governor Says Administrative and Legislative Phases Will Unite in General Conference,” The New York Times, January 21, 1929; “Roosevelt Fights for Old Age Relief: Insists on His Own Plan, Threatening the Republican Inquiry Bill with Veto,” The New York Times, March 1, 1929; “Old-Age Relief,” The New York Times, March 1, 1929.
the problem of old age dependency”; rather, “economists, statisticians, and representatives of charitable and relief agencies insisted that old age pensions was the only method of dealing with the problem satisfactorily.” This remarkable shift in public sentiment on the question of old-age pensions suggested an increasing recognition on the part of New York’s private welfare community that existing methods to support the elderly were not adequate to accomplish that feat. The moment that social reformers like Abraham Epstein had long crusaded for seemed to be at hand: if a major industrial state like New York could be persuaded to adopt old age pensions, then perhaps the movement for state-level pensions, which had ultimately sputtered and stalled out during the 1920s, might be revived and expanded.

Ultimately, the New York Commission on Old Age Security recommended in February 1930 to the New York State Legislature that “a State and county system of pensions for the needy of 70 years of more” be established. The high age qualification which the commission recommended — and the conditions it attached to receipt of pensions (“receipts of relief would have to be citizens and residents of the State for the preceding ten years for whose support no financially able person would be legally responsible”) suggested that the old, lingering suspicions about old age pensions as nothing but a thinly (and poorly) disguised dole had not been entirely banished, but more importantly, the commission for the first time gave official approval to the argument which Epstein and other reformers had been advocating for years. Speaking on behalf of the commission, state Senator Seabury C. Mastick observed:

I feel that by the introduction of these bills a revolutionary step has been taken in the policy of the State in regard to the discharge of its responsibility toward the needy aged. We have had in mind constantly the desirability of extending this assistance, not in the form of charity administered in a humiliating manner in institutions but in the form of aid extended in the home where the recipient will remain in contact and in association with his or her loved ones. The commission feels that it has here a sound plan which will stand the test both of the courts and of public opinion.34

In other words, the public old-age pension – far from destroying or weakening the moral fiber of its recipients – was instead a humanitarian measure, designed to protect families by keeping them whole (and by extension, keeping the elderly out of public almshouses). After factoring in financial and residency requirements, the anticipated 51,000 recipients of the old age pension represented only a fragment of the total elderly population in the state: by the commission’s own accounting, there were approximately 350,000 persons aged 70 or over in New York State as of June 1929.35

However limited in scale and scope were the commission’s recommendations for New York’s old age pensions, they could not have come at a better time. In March 1930, the New York Times reported that rapidly rising unemployment in the state was “driving an unusual number of persons to public and private lodging houses and increasing the number of aged poor in the care of public institutions.”36 In New York City, municipal lodging houses experienced a nearly 20% rise (from 137,032 in 1928 to 159,155 in 1929) in the number of nights’ care provided, which had led to

34 Ibid.
“serious overcrowding” problems. Within two months’ of the commission’s report, Franklin Roosevelt signed the old age pension bill into law. As he did so, he made clear his preference for a social insurance model of financing old age pensions by characterizing the newly-enacted measure as “a mere extension of the poor law” because it merely gave the “aged food and a roof over their heads” and noted that “my hope is that someday we can have a system to encourage savings that will provide ease and comfort as well as food and shelter.” Essentially, Roosevelt opposed using general tax revenues to support the new old-age pension system, and he believed that a contributory model for financing it would have the preferred outcome of avoiding the creation of a permanent financial burden on the state budget.

The law met with a sustained and positive response on the part of New York’s elderly citizens. Within the first week of open enrollment for the old-age pension system in early September 1930, 2,609 people over the age of 70 in New York City alone had applied for coverage under the new law, a figure that significantly outpaced what state officials had originally expected would be the case. By November 30, 1930, 25,000 applications had been received, but only 1,656 had been approved by the New York City Department of Public Welfare. Once he became President,

37 Ibid.
39 See also Daniel Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 438. As Abe Bortz has observed, Roosevelt’s preference for contributory insurance may have also reflected his own personally conservative instincts. As Roosevelt stated in his 1931 message to the New York State Legislature, “our American aged do not want charity, but rather old age comforts to which they are rightfully entitled by their own thrift and foresight in the form of insurance.” See Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Annual Message to the Legislature (Excerpts), January 7, 1931 in Franklin Roosevelt, Public Papers of the Presidents: Franklin Roosevelt, 1933-1945, Vol. 9 (1940): 100-111.
41 “Vote Aided Fight for Aid to Aged: 12 Governors and 6 Senators Elected This Year Are Listed as Supporters of Plan,” The New York Times, November 30, 1930. After the enactment of Social Security in 1935, the number of New York City residents who successfully applied for newly enhanced old-age assistance aid reached 44,410 by April 30, 1937. This increase followed the lowering of the age of eligibility from 70 to 65, though New York City officials proudly boasted of the other restrictions which remained attached to receipt of assistance. Speaking to the New York
Roosevelt would have the opportunity to create the “system to encourage savings,” which he had publicly pined for in 1930. No doubt relying on his experience as Governor of New York State with old age pensions, Roosevelt maintained an active interest in the subject after he became President in 1933. As Frances Perkins later recalled, “before his Inauguration in 1933 Roosevelt had agreed that we should explore at once methods for setting up unemployment and old-age insurance in the United States.” Roosevelt had been carried into office over Hoover in part because of his promises to undertake some manner of reform to get the country out of the Depression, and so it was not too surprising that older Americans hoped to grab the new President’s attention with numerous telegrams and frantic letters.

While Roosevelt and his advisers were aware of just how desperate economic circumstances had become for many Americans, they had not unreasonably decided to spend the administration’s early days halting the cascading bank failures in major states like Michigan, Illinois, and New York which threatened to bring about an economic apocalypse. The decision to prioritize badly needed banking industry reform, though, would prove to have fateful consequences for the course of social welfare policy development in the United States, especially with respect to older and increasingly indigent people. Though Franklin Roosevelt announced in June 1934 his intention to push for legislation to provide “for the security of the men, women and children of the nation,” increasingly, older people had begun to look elsewhere for succor and the promise of salvation.

__Times__ in May 1937, William Hodson, the city’s Commissioner of Public Welfare, noted that “unlike other states, which have made their old-age assistance programs vehicles for political ends, New York City and State have restricted aid to those who were entitled to receive it.” Hodson added that “a careful, non-political administration” ensured adequate safeguarding of “the rights of the beneficiaries and the taxpayers.” See “City Old-Age Rolls Up 63% in 7 Months,” __The New York Times__, May 23, 1937.

The Emergence of the Townsend Movement

They soon found it, albeit from some unlikely sources. As the Depression continued to deepen during Roosevelt’s first term, numerous older Americans, like many of their fellow Americans, soon began to gravitate towards organizations and individuals who offered possible solutions to the protracted economic crisis of the Great Depression. Indeed, the deeply unsettled politics of economic crisis during the 1930s permitted (if briefly,) the emergence of various dissident ideologies throughout the United States. To borrow Alan Brinkley’s phrase, these “voices of protest” were heard from nearly every part of the American political spectrum, ranging from the growing strength enjoyed by the German-American Bund and other fascist-friendly organizations on the far-right to the resurgence of the Communist Party of the United States on the American left.

Perhaps no voices were louder, than those of the Reverend Father Charles M. Coughlin and Senator Huey P. Long of Louisiana, who had both succeeded in converting roiling social discontent into significant popular support for their respective “National Union for Social Justice” and “Share Our Wealth” organizations. Students of American history have rightfully emphasized the pivotal role played by both men in shaping “the dissident ideology” of the 1930s and its attempt to hold back the unruly forces of modernity which had been reshaping the United States for decades.44 Both men had initially sought accommodation and alliance with Franklin Roosevelt, and both had become bitter, implacable foes of the Roosevelt administration when it became clear the President had no intention of affording them privileged access to his administration for any longer than was necessary for survival in the fickle politics of the early 1930s. Instead, Roosevelt had merely sought

44 See Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest, esp. chapter 7 (“The Dissident Ideology”), 143-168.
to placate them, and had studiously stroked both men’s egos just enough early in his administration to avoid a damaging public confrontation with them and their supporters.45

To some extent, Roosevelt had the good fortune of seeing the national movements that Long and Coughlin purported to lead sputter after Long was assassinated in September 1935 and Coughlin veered deeper into the paranoid embrace of anti-Semitism in the late 1930s. Yet while Long and Coughlin were perhaps the two loudest and energetic voices of protest during the 1930s, other quieter, but still powerful voices, appeared in the chorus of discontent. Chief among them was Dr. Francis Townsend, a retired doctor who resided in Long Beach, California. Unlike Huey Long or Father Coughlin, Townsend lacked the brash personal energy and established media platform for spreading his message. Despite Townsend’s lack of charisma or a radio program, for many older Americans, his Townsend Movement soon became the preferred vehicle for voicing their frustrations and demanding sweeping changes in how America should handle the problem of economic security in old age.46 The Townsend Movement had come into being after Townsend had written a letter to the editor of a local Long Beach, California newspaper in September 1933 highlighting his plan of guaranteed old-age pensions as a way to end the Great Depression by retiring and supporting all Americans aged sixty or older with $200 monthly pensions as “surplus workers” no longer necessary for economic growth and production.47

45 My brief summary here of FDR’s relationship with Father Coughlin and Senator Huey Long relies heavily upon Alan Brinkley’s masterful study in *Voices of Protest*. For his own part, Roosevelt was under no illusions about the sort of threat which Father Coughlin and Huey Long posed to the established exercise of democratic governance in the United States. Roosevelt famously considered Long to be the second most dangerous man in America (the first, in his opinion, was Douglas MacArthur). See Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2008), 285.
Somewhat improbably, that letter soon attracted hundreds of replies, a clear and obvious indication that Townsend’s proposal had inadvertently struck a chord with a wide audience. This reaction of mass interest and support had caught Townsend off-guard. In Robert McElvaine’s words, “he had planned no concrete action following his original letter,” but “Townsend quickly rose to the task.” \(^\text{48}\) Notwithstanding his unsteady first steps into the public arena, Dr. Townsend soon proved himself far savvier than his detractors would have wished him, as evidenced by the surprisingly resilient structure of the “Old Age Revolving Pensions, Ltd.” (OARP) corporation he quickly formed with several business partners in order to convert this unexpected audience into a

more organized political force capable of applying sufficient political pressure on elected officials to enact the Townsend Plan’s centerpiece objective of publicly sponsored old age pensions.

From its unlikely origins, the OARP or Townsend Movement soon grew into a classic grassroots organization, grounded in the support of local Townsend Clubs scattered throughout the nation, though most sprang up in Townsend’s home state of California and in the Mountain and Midwest states.49 By 1935, local Townsend Club members had started to bombard congressional and state legislative offices with letter-writing campaigns demanding favorable legislative action on the Townsend Plan.50 Students of the Townsend Movement have generally identified two key reasons for the movement’s sudden and rapid growth.51 First, like Dr. Townsend himself, many of the Movement’s members came from a native-born, middle-class Midwestern background, and the Movement’s milieu would eventually be shaped by a shared set of cultural and social reference


50 In 1938 – five years after Dr. Townsend had first written his letter to the editor proposing the Townsend Plan, and three years after the enactment of the Social Security Act, the Townsend Plan still enjoyed a significant amount of support on Capitol Hill. As Robert McElvaine notes, “a minimum of 40 of the 169 successful Republican House candidates in 1938 owed their victories at least in part to their (often hypocritical) endorsements of the Townsend Plan” (McElvaine, The Great Depression, 305). Dr. Townsend had by 1936 become thoroughly embittered and openly antagonistic towards Franklin Roosevelt, the New Deal, and the Social Security Act, and so the Townsend Movement openly made common-cause with some of the most reactionary, anti-New Deal elements within the Republican Party in various parts of the United States. (That such alliances with politicians who were unlikely to advance a government-funded pension scheme far more generous in its benefits than anything enacted, proposed, or even daydreamed by even the most devoutly liberal New Dealer seems to have escaped the notice of Dr. Townsend and most of his followers, who seemed increasingly more concerned with trying to be a thorn in Franklin Roosevelt’s side rather than the enactment of their own agenda). While this alliance probably helped elect Republicans to Congress, such efforts did not do terribly much to advance the Townsend Movement’s agenda on Capitol Hill. The white South’s emissaries there were already happily committed to the operational Old Age Assistance provisions of the Social Security Act, and therefore saw no reason to ally with their usual partners in the Congressional “conservative coalition” of Midwestern Republicans and Southern Democrats to hamper and frustrate the more liberal New Dealers in the Roosevelt administration.

points of its members, who identified closely with Dr. Townsend. Additionally, it is probable that the simplicity of the Plan’s math made it intuitively easier for its grassroots members to understand and support. As Robert McElvaine has written, the Townsend Plan

proposed to pay every American citizen over the age of sixty $200 each month, provided that he or she had never been convicted of a crime, agreed to give up all other income, and pledged to spend the $200 within thirty days. Townsend contended that his plan would end the Depression and benefit young as well as old. The aged would no longer compete with younger people for jobs, the economy would be stimulated by all the purchases the elderly would make, and everyone would live happily ever after.53

Of course, in reality, everyone would not live happily ever after. The Townsend Plan’s funding was predicated upon a massive, regressive “transaction tax” that would penalize the everyday transactions of American consumers.54 The Plan would therefore “help one poor group (the aged) at the expense of another (working-class consumers)…the rich would be unharmed, the economy unhelped.”55 The amount of economic havoc that the Townsend Plan would have wreaked upon a debilitated economy is probably incalculable, but such concerns were almost secondary in the frenetic atmosphere of the Great Depression. What mattered, as McElvaine has observed, is that Townsend offered the American middle class – particularly its older members – a panacea, and he presented it in terms they could understand. It was very attractive. A married couple, both over sixty years of age, would be given $4800 a year. What this meant can be fully appreciated only when it is realized that 87 percent of all American families had annual incomes below $2500 in 1935. That fact in itself indicates that the plan was unworkable.56

54 Ibid. McElvaine further observes that “the Townsend Plan was essentially conservative. Unlike Huey Long, or even Father Coughlin, Townsend never seriously proposed to soak the rich. He indicated no desire to challenge the basic tenets of capitalism.” (Ibid., 241).
55 Ibid., 241.
56 Ibid., 242. McElvaine writes that “the sum Townsend proposed to pay the aged was one-half of the national income for 1934.” (Ibid., 242).
Despite widespread support in the Midwest and the West, the Townsend Plan did not enjoy much support from most of the established players in American politics, regardless of their place on the political spectrum. Indeed, condemnation of the Townsend Plan made for the strangest of bedfellows in an already topsy-turvy political climate: politically right-leaning organizations such as the New Deal-loathing Liberty League and National Association of Manufacturers denounced it; as did the avowedly left-wing Communist Party of the United States of America, the Socialist party, and the politically cautious American Federation of Labor.57

57 Ibid., 242. While not explicitly condemning the Townsend Plan by name, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce made its feelings on the subject known in November 1934 when it publicly declared that “the President is the great and lone barrier against radicalism,” in the hope that Roosevelt would block “radical” measures (such as legislation to enact the Townsend Plan) proposed by members of Congress. See The New York Times, November 18, 1934. The late Robert Zieger has observed that the crisis of the Great Depression did not deeply unmoor the AFL from its traditional aversion to direct intervention on behalf of public social programs to benefits for the working class. See also William Forbath’s Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991). Green’s presence on the Committee on Economic Security’s membership roster seems to have been largely pro forma rather than deeply participatory. The CIO – which did not exist until the mid-1930s – only became an active partner of the Democratic Party in the early 1940s (see Robert H. Zieger, The CIO: 1935-1955 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 111). Though the AFL had a strained relationship to Social Security, its president William Green had offered the organization’s tentative support to the old age pension movement in 1931. See “Green Pledges Aid to Old-Age Relief: A. F. of L. Head Urges State Control and Minimum Benefit of $300 a Year at 65,” The New York Times, April 11, 1931.
Yet this lack of obvious institutional support did little to deter Dr. Townsend or his supporters, and may have actually helped bolster Townsend’s public image and appeal to his followers as a selfless servant of older people who could be trusted to act in their best interests regardless of what politicians in Washington, D.C., or elsewhere desired. In Robert McElvaine’s words, “the sandcastles that Dr. Townsend built were very pretty and his movement flourished.”

Moreover,

Public sentiment was ripe for a plan to aid the aged. When asked in December 1935 whether they favored government old-age pensions for needy persons, a whopping 89 percent of a cross section of Americans answered affirmatively...In 1936, Townsend Club leaders claimed a nationwide membership of 3.5 million. In only three months Townsendites collected over 20 million signatures on their petitions. This represented one-fifth of the adults in the United States...Two 1936 public opinion surveys showed even greater support for the

doctor’s scheme. Approximately one-half of the Americans surveyed early in 1936 favored the plan.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite all of the condemnation and mockery which the Townsend Plan had received, its supporters remained firmly anchored in place. New York journalists and Washington politicians may have chortled at him, but Townsend was confident that he had the necessary popular support to press forward with his agenda. Such growing confidence probably owed much to the letters from elderly Americans which he received from across much of the nation. Just as they had once largely turned to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt for succor, now the letters from older Americans to the Roosevelts revealed an increasingly ominous change in mood and tone. As a “tak payer [sic]” from Manistique, Michigan wrote to the Roosevelts in March 1936:

\begin{quote}
Do you think that a man of the age of 60 or 70 years old can do the work that a man can do at the age of 25 he can not he would collapes [sic]. When old age creaps upon you. you come incontact with all kinds alments akes pains nerviness sleepless and sightless. There is know [sic] 60 per cent of the W.P.A. workers over 60 years old. The younger class seems to forget the forefathers. And denie the old age the $200. a month old age pention something that would give the old age a little pleasure for the last few years they have to live. Such pention [sic] plan is the only thing that will brin back this cuntry [sic] to normal and prospairty a decint liven and liveing wages.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

Moreover, while the appeal of publicly sponsored old age pensions to impoverished older Americans might seem obvious in retrospect, such pensions also appealed to the younger family members of older Americans who frequently now found themselves more burdened by the need to support elderly parents or relatives. As “Mrs. J.S.” from Akron, Ohio, wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt in February 1936:

\begin{quote}
A few weeks ago, I heard your talk over the air, on the subject of the Old age pension [sic], and I got to thinking what a blessing it would
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. Alan Brinkley observes that fully one sixth of the residents of San Diego, California were dues-paying members of Townsend Clubs, and that 105,000 men and women out of a population of 180,000 signed an appeal to their Congressman on behalf of the Townsend Plan (Brinkley, \textit{Voices of Protest}, 223-224).

\textsuperscript{60} McElvaine, \textit{Down and Out in the Great Depression}, 187-188.
be to my mother, if it was possible for her to receive that pension, if
the bill should pass... I thought as long as I lived there was no need to
worry about her being taken care of, but I never dreamed of a
depression like we have had well it changed the whole course of our
lives we have suffered, and no one knowes [sic] but our own
family... I am in position to do the right thing for mother, I cant [sic]
give her anything but her living... 61

Other voices echoed the sorrows of Mrs. J.S.’s letter.62 The extraordinary strains of the Great
Depression had placed a new financial burden upon middle and working-class families throughout
the nation, and consequently mothers, daughters, and wives began to write more persistently to
Eleanor Roosevelt to plead the case for old-age pensions to help their elderly relatives. Such women
might have been able to take care of older relatives in happier days – and indeed, many had – but
the Great Depression was unforgiving to such arrangements. In the brave new world of the
Depression, a perfect storm had brought about the collapse of innumerable private charities, the
dissolution of family bonds, and shattered the ability of state and local governments to adequately
deal with the crisis of mass unemployment.

Faced with the choice between supporting their children or their parents, many Americans
could only despair and hope for a miracle – “a gift from heaven” (as Mrs. J.S. put it) – to save them.
Given such conditions, the broad appeal of the Townsend Plan’s publicly sponsored old age
pensions to older Americans and their families is not hard to fathom. The economic climate of the
Depression had created an environment in which publicly supported old age pensions no longer
seemed like a venal corruption of American democracy; more and more, they appeared to be a tool
to safeguard and protect the economic security of the indigent elderly.63 State legislatures which had

61 Ibid., 99-100.
62 See, for example, Ibid., 100-107.
63 “1,044 Editors Back Old-Age Pensions,” The New York Times, December 6, 1931. As the Times reported, inn a
survey published by Abraham Epstein’s American Association for Old Age Security (AAOS), a survey of 1,345
newspaper editors on the question of old-age security revealed that 77% (1,044 papers) advocated some form of old-age
pension (though not necessarily the pension plan which the AAOS favored). In May 1933, the Times reported that nine
once been reluctant to even go through the formality of setting up a commission or a council to investigate the subject now energetically leapt into the fray, and long-beleaguered old-age pension advocates like Abraham Epstein could almost feel the winds of change beginning to blow in their favor.\footnote{Ibid.}

The Townsend Movement and the New Deal


The Wagner Lewis bill in the Congress covered only unemployment insurance, but there was a great demand for old-age insurance also. It was easy to add this feature – and politically almost essential. One hardly realizes nowadays how strong was the sentiment in favor of the Townsend Plan and other exotic schemes for giving the aged a weekly income. In some districts the Townsend Plan was the chief political issue, and men supporting it were elected to Congress. The pressure from its advocates was intense. The President began telling people he was in favor of adding old-age insurance clauses to the bill and putting it through as one program.\footnote{Frances Perkins, The Roosevelt I Knew, ed. Adam Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 266-267.}

new states had enacted old-age relief legislation, a development which brought the total number of states with old age pensions to twenty-five (i.e., a majority of the then forty-eight states).
While influential New Dealers and established social commentators might have believed the Townsend Plan was a form of magical thinking which required suspension of disbelief in order to be remotely plausible, grassroots support for the Townsend Movement remained palpable throughout the 1930s. This support eventually compelled the Roosevelt administration to try and blunt any potential impact the Townsend Movement might have on federal policies designed to address the impoverishment of formerly middle- and working-class older Americans, and to ensure that neither Townsend nor his movement could threaten the long-term viability of the Roosevelt administration.

In June 1934, therefore, the Roosevelt administration announced the appointment of a Committee on Economic Security charged with carrying out the President’s “pledge to insure the future social well-being of the United States” by studying “almost every phase of economic and social hazard from old age and unemployment to the ‘economic aspects of maternity.’” 68 The Committee, which consisted primarily of academic economists, social welfare experts, and federal and state officials hastily borrowed from across the country, soon went to work at a breakneck pace. 69

By November 1934, the Committee on Economic Security had begun to consider which legislative proposals it would recommend to the President, who had made known his desire for a “comprehensive program for economic security” that he could then present to Congress at the start of its session in January 1935. 70 In the December 1934, Barbara Armstrong, a University of California economist and consultant to the Committee on Economic Security, offered strong implicit evidence of the impact of the Townsend Movement’s ability to organize older Americans.

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into a potentially powerful political force on the Committee’s deliberations. Writing in the *New York Times*, Armstrong observed that the existing social welfare infrastructure of poorhouses and county poor farms had proven to be woefully ineffective and financially inefficient in assuring impoverished older people some modicum of economic security without humiliating them in the process. Keeping her cards close to the vest, Armstrong highlighted the laggard pace of the United States compared to the United Kingdom and other industrialized nations in providing for the indigent elderly, and hinted that reforms to replace the humiliation and deprivation of the poorhouse and poor farm would soon be forthcoming from the Committee on Economic Security’s recommendations.  

When the Committee’s report arrived on the President’s desk in January 1935, its recommendations on the subject of old-age economic security were threefold: first, that the federal government subsidize existing state-level old age assistance programs; second, that “a national compulsory old age insurance system to cover the major number of the nation’s industrial workers” be enacted; and finally, that “a national system of voluntary individual old age annuities for person not covered by either of the other measures” also be set up.  

Aside from its three major policy recommendations, the Committee’s report asserted that “State action alone cannot be relied on to provide either adequate or universal old-age insurance…although twenty-eight States and two Territories have old-age assistance laws, many of these are not functioning, and others have cut benefits below a proper minimum and have long waiting lists.”  

In essence, the Committee on Economic Security was proposing to solve the problem of old-age economic security by means that were both compulsory and voluntary, and to buttress existing

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72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.
state-level relief efforts with the might of the Federal treasury. While it avoided singling out any one particular state or Territory for censure, the Committee on Economic Security’s report made clear that state-level efforts to provide old-age assistance were simply inadequate, and by establishing a federal system, the Committee’s members hoped to move the shift of economic security away from state and local level governments permanently. Such a major shift of social responsibility – and in an area of domestic policy in which the federal government had traditionally not played an overt role – was sure to provoke political controversy and opposition, and it was not immediately clear how such legislation would get through Congress, even though the President did enjoy the luxury of lopsided congressional Democratic majorities.

Taking stock of the report, the Roosevelt administration began to plan its strategy for getting the Committee’s report translated into law. Speaking before a joint session of the Senate and House on January 4, 1935, Roosevelt told the Congress that the “Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief,” a goal he meant to accomplish by “providing 3,500,000 jobs on public works projects for the nation’s idle ‘employables.’” Alongside measures to provide public employment for “employables,” Roosevelt promised Congress a set of recommendations for “social security, covering unemployment insurance and old-age pensions” among a plethora of items which

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74 As Frank Bane, the Executive Director of the original Social Security Board, stated in a December 1936 radio address, “With the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, the federal government entered into a long-time partnership with its states and their communities – a partnership for the protection of the American people. In this joint enterprise, the state takes the lead… [i]f the objectives of the Act are to be realized – actually realized in the daily lives of our people – it cannot be too strongly emphasized that the job of administration must be done by the states.” U.S. Social Security Administration website, source URL: http://www.ssa.gov/history/history.html (Accessed October 16, 2016).

75 See also “Congress Faces a Heavy Program,” The New York Times, January 2, 1935.

the Committee on Economic Security had identified as crucial to reducing “dependency and illness.”

Within two weeks of the President’s Message to Congress, the administration submitted the Committee on Economic Security’s report for the consideration of Capitol Hill’s sachems. Sensitive to the possible objections of Southern Democrats to a strengthening of Washington’s role in social welfare, Roosevelt let it be known that the proposed Social Security program was designed “to assist States in every way in setting up their own social security systems,” and that any assistance to states in “meeting the immediate emergency problems of the indigent where States have pension plans now in operation” would be on a strictly temporary basis.

While liberals in the House immediately sought “to broaden the proposed legislation,” the Roosevelt administration remained coolly noncommittal on the subject of expanding the Social Security legislation beyond what had already been proposed to Congress. The word from the White House, on both Social Security and other measures of pending legislation, was caution, with the President himself describing the administration’s legislative agenda as not of “a drastic nature.”

The administration’s strategy of caution was a deliberate one. The proposed Social Security Act did not enjoy much support on Capitol Hill; instead, members of Congress seemed more and more attracted to the siren song of the Townsend Movement. Writing in the *New York Times*, Arthur Krock observed in mid-January 1935:

> Unless the members of Congress are almost unanimously ignorant of the national state of mind, people who would seriously damage or destroy the economic security program offered by the President today would simply be letting the country in for calamitous alternatives. If Senators and Representatives accurately describe the feeling in their

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districts and the testimony of their correspondence, then the defeat or extreme dilution of the Roosevelt proposals will mean the ascendancy of the ideas of Huey P. Long, Dr. Townsend, or both.

While Krock proceeded to mock the pretensions of both Long and Townsend to high political power, he conceded that “a glance at any Senator’s correspondence will demonstrate [that] many, many people – perhaps several millions – believe firmly in the practicability and justice of the Townsend Plan.”

Despite Krock’s attempts to portray the Roosevelt administration’s approach as the only reasonable choice, the administration’s foes could not be placated. The National Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.) declared itself to be in favor of “the general objectives of the program but unalterably opposed to the payroll tax through which it is to be financed,” on the grounds that the tax would have an overall deflationary effect on the economy be removing far too much money from active circulation. While N.A.M.’s objections to the Roosevelt administration’s proposals were not always fairly made, on the issue of Social Security’s financing, N.A.M. had a point: Social Security’s payroll tax would remove money from circulation, and it would have a deflationary effect at a time when more rather than less money pumped into circulation by the government was the preferable solution as John Maynard Keynes and other economists had argued.

For the moment, though, the Roosevelt administration was far more concerned about the possible effect that Townsend Movement’s growing numbers might have on Congress than it was about N.A.M.’s opposition. In mid-February 1935, Dr. Townsend had appeared before a hostile Senate Finance Committee to try and persuade them of the rightness of his proposed $200-a-month old-age pension plan. Peppering the elderly doctor with questions about the Townsend Plan’s financing that he was unready or unwilling to answer, the hearing soon devolved into a carnival-like

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atmosphere, with each of the assembled senators taking turns baiting and berating Townsend. An unsmiling Townsend parried with most of the senators, who made clear that they thought him little more than a confidence man. Instead, Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison made clear at the Townsend hearing that the Senate Finance Committee would focus its energy and attention on the Roosevelt administration’s Social Security program proposal, even though, as Senator Harrison later confided to Marion Folsom, he wasn’t entirely sure what the Committee on Economic Security was asking Congress to do.83

Despite the subdued reception that greeted the proposed Social Security bill on Capitol Hill, it turned out there was one constituency that the Roosevelt administration found it could count upon to shepherd the legislation through Capitol Hill: the South. If southern legislators had no great love for New Deal programs like the Works Progress Administration, the same was not true for the Social Security Act, especially its title providing for Old Age Assistance – in effect, a kind of federal-state matching grant program designed to temporarily provide non-contributory pensions for older Americans who would likely be ineligible for the provisions of Old Age Insurance.84

In essence, the Social Security Act’s two main titles were designed to deal with old-age economic security in a way that distinctly disadvantaged African Americans. First, it excluded from eligibility two of the major categories of work that employed African-Americans (especially in the still largely agricultural Southern states). Secondly, it offered matching federal funds to supplement

83 Ibid. As Harrison reputedly told Folsom with reference to the Social Security Act, “You know, this is a hell of a complicated proposition we’ve got here. You’re the first fellow we’ve had to testify that we can understand. Just what do you want us to do?” See Tom Wicker, “Social Security Marks 25th Year,” The New York Times, August 14, 1960.
existing but underfunded state-level pension plans in the Southern states without exercising direct oversight of state-level authorities as to how those funds would actually be administered.

In other words, both Social Security’s Old Age Insurance and its Assistance titles were altered to placate the demands of white Southerners that little if any old-age relief would ever reach impoverished African-American communities.\(^{85}\) Despite Roosevelt’s obvious distaste for direct old age assistance – which he viewed as being far too similar to the sort of “dole” that good government reformers had been fighting to render extinct since the turn of the twentieth century – he acceded to Southern demands. Doing so ultimately permitted the enactment of the overall Social Security Act, including Roosevelt’s favored method of contributory old age social insurance. Unlike the Old Age Assistance title, the Old Age Insurance title was significantly less popular with both parties on Capitol Hill because it was not scheduled to go into effect until 1942, and therefore would do little to calm congressional jitters about the Townsend Movement’s threats to dislodge them from office.\(^{86}\)

**The South and Social Security**

Southern Democrats had good reason and the necessary political standing to demand the non-contributory pension funds proffered by the Old Age Assistance title of the Social Security Act. In Oklahoma and Texas, for example, between forty-three and forty-five of every one hundred people aged 65 years or older received old-age assistance, with the federal government responsible

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\(^{85}\) As Michael Katz has noted, the categorical limitations placed on eligibility to enroll Social Security by Southern legislators ensured that two-thirds of African-Americans ineligible to receive assistance. See Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 252.

\(^{86}\) As Daniel Rodgers has observed, in order to make Social Security politically palatable, “direct grants-in-aid were extended to the states for a number of family welfare and public health programs and, more generously still, for categorical, British-style payments to the elderly poor. It was the popularity of the last section that ultimately pulled the rest through Congress. The insurance sections, by contrast, ran into much more considerable flack. Conservatives, beating the old corruption drum, worried that the reserves proposed under the old-age insurance section of the act would become simply a gigantic political slush fund.” (Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 443).
for supplying a considerable amount of the funds necessary to support this assistance.87 As a later Federal Security Agency report on Social Security’s old age assistance program noted,

great variations are to be found among the States in the number of recipients of old-age assistance in relation to aged population. In December 1949 the recipient rate ranged from 67 per 1,000 in Delaware and New Jersey to 829 per 1,000 in Louisiana...In general the States that are predominantly rural – and consequently have the least protection from the old-age and survivors’ insurance system – have the highest recipient rates.88

Of the states with the ten highest Social Security Old Age Assistance program recipient rates, seven were in the South (Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama), while three were outside the South (Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico). By contrast, none of these states ranked among the ten states with the highest old age insurance recipient rates, nor did any Southern state.89 Furthermore, G. Calvin MacKenzie and Robert Weisbrot observe that

[t]he Democratic Party was the only party in nearly every part of the South and all of that region’s representatives in Congress were Democrats. Because southern incumbents were rarely defeated in primaries, and never in general election, they amassed seniority much more effectively than representatives from other regions. And when the Democratic Party found itself in the majority in the House after 1930, southerners in large numbers reaped the benefits of their accumulated seniority.90

Because of its strong position within the now-dominant Democratic Party, the South was now newly empowered in the nation’s politics in a manner that it had not been for generations, and its representatives on Capitol Hill were unafraid to wield a legislative cudgel on behalf of their region’s interests. Any legislation of major significance had to pass through the South’s committee-heavy

89 Ibid.
90 MacKenzie and Weisbrot, The Liberal Hour, 44.
legislative gauntlet on Capitol Hill, and even Franklin Roosevelt at the height of his power and popularity was obliged to respect Southern prerogatives (even as he occasionally sought ways to shortcut them).

Social Security’s Old Age Assistance title allowed the South to have its cake and eat it too: the federal government would pick up the tab of subsidizing the South’s elderly (white) citizens because the administration and disbursement of old age assistance (not old age insurance) monies were left up to the individual states to decide eligibility criteria and disbursement methodology. Such allowances were crucial to winning the support of firmly entrenched white Southern powers-that-be, who made no pretext of doling out federal old age assistance funds in a racially equitable manner to the great masses of impoverished Southerners. The Jackson Daily News of Mississippi spoke for many white Southerners when it declared that “the average Mississippian can’t imagine himself chipping into pay pensions for able-bodied Negroes to sit around in idleness on front galleries supporting their kinfolks on pensions, while cotton and corn crops are crying for workers to get them out of the grass.”

Such hostility had helped defeat the efforts of the Townsend Movement to expand and organize in Southern states; for many white Southerners, however deep the appeal of the Townsend Plan’s generous, guaranteed old-age pension plan may have been, the prospect of elderly African-Americans also receiving such pensions made Dr. Townsend a persona non grata in much of the

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92 In the words of Daniel Rodgers, “Southerners wielded their potential veto power to slice out every phrase in the [Social Security] act that the courts might have construed as equalizing black and white welfare benefits – and, with the help of Roosevelt’s always fiscally cautious secretary of the treasury, to cut workers in agriculture, which was still the core of the southern economy, out of both the old-age and unemployment insurance provisions of the act.” (Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings, 443-444).

93 Jackson (Miss.) Daily News, June 20, 1935; originally quoted in Robert McElvaine, The Great Depression, 257.
South, despite early and repeated attempts by the Townsend Movement to organize older white Southerners into local Townsend clubs in the region.⁹⁴

Thus, in Ira Katznelson’s fitting phrase, Social Security’s provisions for old age assistance was a classic case of “when affirmative action was white”: the traditionally wary South had acquiesced to new, unprecedented federal legislation in the form of the Social Security Act, but had done so on terms that could hardly have been more favorable to its rulers.⁹⁵ If the Social Security Act had any sort of impact on reducing old age dependency for the next two decades of its existence, it came as a result of the most politically regressive region in the nation demanding a virtually no-strings attached federal subsidy for its elderly citizens, a result that the New Dealers – with their earnest commitment to eradicating the poorhouse and the county poor farm system (and their heartfelt concern for preserving the “dignity” of elderly individuals and their families) could hardly have desired or foreseen, but that they largely acquiesced to as the devil’s due.⁹⁶

While it is tempting to solely locate the blame for Social Security’s early deformities on the backs of racist white Southerners – and they were certainly not blameless in this respect – such a judgment overlooks the fact that non-Southern New Dealers – including Franklin Roosevelt himself – were also directly responsible for Social Security’s shortcomings. As Daniel Rodgers has observed, “the puzzle of the Social Security Act is not why the New Deal Congress should have addressed the economic hazards of unemployment and old age, but why it should have done so

⁹⁴ Implicit evidence of the Townsend Movement’s difficulties in organizing white Southerners and persuading them to join can be found, for example, in Duncan Aikman, “Townsendites Plan High-Pressure Drive,” The New York Times, December 15, 1935. Aikman reported that “in states like Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina organizers are making headway by energetically preaching that any possible harm from giving aging Negroes $200 a month in purchasing power would be outweighed by the good from getting that $200 spent for white man’s goods. As a result the South is no longer upon as the Townsend Movement’s Death Valley.”


⁹⁶ By contrast, African-American lobbying groups as well as the Socialist Party quickly recognized the inherently discriminatory aspects of Social Security as it was originally enacted, and thereafter began to mobilize and demand that the law be amended to be more inclusive of African-American workers. See “Negroes File Plea on Social Security,” The New York Times, January 15, 1937, pg. 7 and “Assails Roosevelt on Sharecroppers: Thomas Tells National Press Club President Ignores South’s Laboring Man,” The New York Times, September 23, 1936.
through insurance.”97 The method of financing Social Security’s old age insurance system, in particular, financially penalized the minority of American workers who were eligible for coverage in the late 1930s. As Robert McElvaine has written,

The [old age] insurance system was based on payroll taxes, as Roosevelt had insisted. The regressive nature of such taxation is obvious: the lower-income workers paid a far larger percentage of their wages in social security taxes than did those whose incomes were above the maximum taxable level.98

Roosevelt’s insistence on payroll taxes to fund the Social Security system had been politically motivated; possibly because he still shared the old Progressive disdain for noncontributory pensions or possibly because he understood that the Social Security system would have to endure withering attacks from both within and without the federal government in the future. As Roosevelt later explained, the Social Security payroll taxes were

[n]ever a problem of economics. They are politics all the way through. We put those payroll contributions there so as to give the contributors a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions and their unemployment benefits. With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program.99

Whatever the reason, the eventual cornerstone of liberal action to expand and develop future federal old-age policy and programs would be based upon a program that depended upon a regressive rather than progressive tax structure to fund it.100

While the Roosevelt administration eventually succeeded in preventing the Townsend Movement from exerting too much influence on the legislative design of Social Security, it could not entirely prevent the Movement’s demand for immediate, guaranteed public assistance for the

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100 As McElvaine further observes, “there was another side to the argument over contributory insurance versus funding from general revenue sources, though. The latter course would be far more equitable and progressive, but taking the former route ensured that the system would not be cutback by subsequent administrations. Once people had contributed their own money, they saw the Social Security system as a “sacred trust,” far different from “charity” programs (McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 257).
elderly from having some impact. While the President and the Committee on Economic Security plainly favored the old-age insurance provisions of the Social Security Act, these measures were not especially popular on Capitol Hill or elsewhere, for both good reasons and bad. Critics of the administration questioned the efficacy of the old-age insurance system in solving the problem of economic insecurity in old age, given that it was not designed to go into effect until 1942 (seven years into the future), and even then would only cover certain categories of workers.\footnote{“Gag Rule Dropped on Social Security,” \textit{The New York Times}, April 11, 1935.} For many representatives and senators, the far more popular option was Social Security’s provisions for old-age assistance, a program under which the Federal government effectively matched and subsidized existing state-level old age pension systems, and under which assistance would flow much sooner from federal to state coffers (and thenceforth to voters).\footnote{See “New Drive in House to Limit Welfare,” \textit{The New York Times}, March 18, 1935.}

In the legislative wrangling that took place over the course of the spring and early summer of 1935, the Roosevelt administration and its allies on Capitol Hill eventually forged a modus vivendi on Social Security, under which concerned congressional representatives got the administration to acquiesce to the inclusion of old-age assistance under the umbrella of Social Security (that the President had opposed as little better than setting up a government dole), with the understanding that old-age assistance would be a temporary program and would be discontinued once the old-age insurance system was up and running at full speed.\footnote{As Frances Perkins later recalled, Roosevelt was particularly insistent on the need for old-age insurance. “We have to have it,” he said. “The Congress can’t stand the pressure of the Townsend Plan unless we have a real old-age insurance system, nor can I face the country without having devised at this time, when we are studying social security, a solid plan which will give some assurance to old people of systematic assistance upon retirement.” Frances Perkins, \textit{The Roosevelt I Knew}, 281. See also the President’s Letter of Transmittal with the CES Report on January 17, 1935, in which Roosevelt expressed his belief that Social Security legislation “should be self-sustaining in the sense that funds for the payment of insurance benefits should not come from the proceeds of general taxation.” “CES Report – President’s Letter of Transmittal,” January 17, 1935, Social Security Administration, (source URL: https://www.ssa.gov/history/reports/ces3.html, accessed October 13, 2016).} In return for its acquiescence, though, the administration was able to keep Congress in line and prevent favorable action on the Townsend

By the time Social Security was signed into law in August 1935, the vituperative fight over its enactment had lent it the interesting distinction of being bitterly and publicly opposed not only by the Townsend Movement but also by representatives of the nation’s industrial community, who had managed to prevent the enactment of the proposed voluntary old-age insurance annuity program which the Committee on Economic Security had pushed for in January; private insurers and their allies had regarded it as an existential threat to the long-term viability of the private commercial insurance industry.\footnote{See “Conferees Agree on Social Security,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 9, 1935; “Social Security Bill is Signed; Gives Pensions to Aged, Jobless,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 15, 1935. See also “Report of the Committee on Economic Security,” Committee on Economic Security, U.S. Social Security Administration, source URL: https://www.ssa.gov/history/reports/ces5.html (Accessed October 13, 2016). According to the Social Security Administration, the Roosevelt administration’s proposed old-age voluntary annuity program was designed to “act as a supplement” to the compulsory Social Security old-age insurance program. Under the proposed annuity program, the federal government would have sold “on a cost basis, deferred life annuities similar to those issued by commercial insurance companies…The primary purpose of the plan [would have been] to offer persons not included within the compulsory system a systematic and safe method of providing for their old age.” See “Research Note #15: The Roosevelt Administration’s Proposal for Voluntary Annuities” on the U.S. Social Security Administration website (source URL: https://www.ssa.gov/history/voluntaryannuities.html), accessed February 25, 2017.} Such attacks on Social Security were not without some merit. The architects of the Social Security Act, in particular, were well aware that it was barely sufficient to meet the crisis of poverty and mass unemployment and that much work remained to be done to improve the law.\footnote{As a 1950 U.S. Department of Labor report noted, “under depression conditions, the employment problems of the older workers are greatly intensified. In 1940, following a decade of depression, workers past age 45, along with the youth, had the highest rates of unemployment.” See Source: “Fact Book on the Employment Problems of Older Workers,” August 13-15, 1950, pg. 21, U.S. Department of Labor, Available at: available at California and West Coast Labor and Industrial Relations, selected publications, IRLE-LB01. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library, University of California, Berkeley. Accessed via the Online Archive of California at http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6p0#dsc/#e01-1.3.9.5 (Accessed September 15, 2016). See also John G. Winant, “Winant Forecasts Social Security,” \textit{The New York Times}, January 5, 1936; and R.L. Duffus, “Winant Outlines the Task of Security,” \textit{The New York Times}, January 5, 1936.} As former Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins later recalled,
[i]t was evident to us that any system of social insurance would not relieve the accumulated poverty. Nor would it relieve the sufferings of the presently old and needy. Nevertheless, it was also evident that this was the time, above all times, to be foresighted about future problems of unemployment and unprotected old age. It was never, I think, suggested by any reasonable person that relief should be abandoned in favor of unemployment and old-age insurance, but it was thought that there could be a blend of the two.\textsuperscript{107}

Though the New Dealers hoped that Social Security would one day be a universal program – Franklin Roosevelt himself had repeatedly expressed his wish that “every child, from the day he is born, [should] be a member of the social security system,” the Social Security Act was inherently debilitated at the moment of its birth.\textsuperscript{108} As William Leuchtenburg observed, “the law was an astonishingly inept and conservative piece of legislation…in no other welfare system in the world did the state shirk all responsibility for old-age indigency and insist that funds be taken out of the current earnings of workers.”\textsuperscript{109}

**The Townsend Movement Regroups**

While the business community licked its wounds after losing the high profile fight over Social Security, the Townsend Movement also moved to reorganize and to expand its national grassroots support in the hope that the Social Security Act was not the last word on the subject of public old-age economic support.\textsuperscript{110} As the Roosevelt administration moved to smooth the business

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 270.
\textsuperscript{109} Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 132. Leuchtenburg later writes that “for all its faults the Social Security Act of 1935 was a new landmark in American history. It reversed historic assumptions about the nature of social responsibility, and it established the proposition that the individual has clear-cut social rights. It was framed in a way that withstood tests in the courts and changes of political mood.” Ibid., 132-133. For a divergent interpretation of the Social Security Act, see Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 445, in which Rodgers writes that “New Deal social insurance took the form not of a broad contract between social groups but of myriad private contracts between individuals and the state.” (Ibid.)
\textsuperscript{110} “Roosevelt Taxes Held Unfair Move for Social Reform,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1935. For more on the business community’s hostility to the New Deal, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009). On the specific issue of the Social Security Act, the business community would remain divided for years to come. Some moderates, like Marion B. Folsom of Eastman Kodak and Gerard Swope of General Electric counseled acceptance and cooperation, while others like Winthrop W. Aldrich continued to thunder against it as a “cruel jest” which would undermine
community’s ruffled feathers after the enactment of Social Security, it offered no such comfort to the Townsend Movement. Instead, the Roosevelt administration worked to reach out to individual states to try and speed up their participation in the Social Security program at the earliest possible moment. As Frances Perkins, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other Roosevelt administration officials unofficially campaigned on behalf of Social Security, the Townsend Movement continued to organize and gather its strength in its native California and elsewhere.

The Townsend Movement’s objectives for doing so were not mysterious. With both eyes clearly focused on the coming presidential election in 1936, Dr. Townsend hoped to be able to flex far more political muscle against the Roosevelt administration, which it not unreasonably suspected of maneuvering behind the scenes to prevent Congress from considering the Townsend Plan. Throughout the fall of 1935 and winter of 1936, the Townsend Movement sought to organize support on Capitol Hill, and enjoyed some modest success in doing so: by the end of December 1935, the Townsendites were loudly trumpeting the support of thirty-nine congressmen (roughly ten percent of the House of Representatives), and were openly working to court both political parties.

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By the time Congress reassembled in early January 1936, though, it was clear that the gathering senators and representatives were in no mood to entertain Townsend’s proposals, whatever magnetic attraction such plans may have held for state and local politicians in the states where the Movement was strongest.\textsuperscript{116} The strained relationship between the Movement and Congress, which had begun with Congress alternating between fearful worry behind closed doors and open derision and mocking of Dr. Townsend at public hearings, now veered into more treacherous waters. In late February 1936, leaders of the Townsend Movement declared their intention of contesting three hundred congressional seats in the upcoming 1936 election; not long thereafter, Congress began investigating Dr. Townsend and his close associates for possible fraudulent use of the OARP’s funds.\textsuperscript{117} As Congress began to investigate the OARP’s finances, other unflattering revelations began to inflict damage on both Dr. Townsend and the OARP’s credibility as selfless advocates on behalf of the nation’s older citizens. A May 1936 \textit{New York Times} article revealed confidential correspondence sent by Dr. Townsend in which he had boasted that he had “the world by the tail with a down-hill pull,” an arrogant claim that was backed by increasingly scant evidence of the OARP’s ability to actually persuade Congress rather than merely try to intimidate it into submission.\textsuperscript{118}

Eventually, as William Leuchtenburg relates, the OARP began to splinter under the pressure of hostile congressional hearings, which revealed that Townsend’s business partner Robert

\textsuperscript{116} Duncan Aikman, “Townsend’s Power Wanes,” \textit{The New York Times}, January 26, 1936. Likewise, opposition to the Townsend Plan remained strong outside Congress, too. In February 1936, Dr. Henry S. Pritchett, the president emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation, condemned the Townsend Movement’s push to enact pensions via political pressure as “likely to become one of the most dangerous, most demoralizing and most costly experiments that have ever been foisted upon a people.” See “Old-Age Pensions Viewed As Menace,” \textit{The New York Times}, February 17, 1936.


Clements had reaped tremendous personal financial gains from the organization.\textsuperscript{119} Townsend and Clements broke off relations, and without Clements at the helm of the OARP, the organization swiftly fell apart at the national level. Townsend later joined forces with Father Coughlin and Gerald L.K. Smith, a former protégé of Huey Long, to form a new third party on a quixotic quest to oust Franklin Roosevelt from the White House in 1936.\textsuperscript{120} Franklin Roosevelt was instead re-elected in one of the largest single landslide electoral victories in the history of the United States.

Though congressional offices were no longer drowned by a deluge of mail from the Townsendites after 1936, the Movement’s goal of a broad and generous guaranteed old-age pension continued to animate the actions of its members.\textsuperscript{121} Despite the miscalculations made by Townsend and other senior leaders of the OARP about the organization’s ability to secure passage of its agenda, the Townsend Movement continued to enjoy substantial popular support, courtesy of the numerous local, grassroots Townsend Clubs scattered throughout the nation. Alan Brinkley has observed that “the Townsend Clubs survived and prospered, developing into a large and vibrant national movement, infiltrating the fabric of insurgent politics in nearly every region of the country, and encouraging the hopes of those who believed a major new force was establishing itself in American public life.”\textsuperscript{122} As one elderly Michigan woman wrote to the Roosevelts in late January

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} In 1935, the Townsend Movement “claimed control of two western governors and the legislatures of seven western states. In November 1935, it threw a bad scare into politicians east of the Mississippi. Verner Main, the only candidate to support the Townsend Plan in a field of five, won the Republican Primary for Michigan’s Third Congressional District with 13,419 votes; his nearest opponent polled only 4,806 votes. Main went on to defeat his Democratic opponent in the by election in December.” “The Townsend Threat,” \textit{Today}, V (December 28, 1935), 12; \textit{Townsend National Weekly}, I (December 2, 1935), 1; \textit{News-Week}, VI (December 28, 1935), 5-7; all cited in Leuchtenburg, \textit{Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal}, 181. For evidence of the Townsend Movement’s declining national power, see Duncan Aikman, “Twilight of Townsend Plan As a Political Force Is Seen In Congress,” \textit{The New York Times}, January 24, 1937.
\textsuperscript{122} Brinkley, \textit{Voices of Protest}, 224.
1936, while the Townsend Plan “looked like a fairy tale or the Milinium [sic] at first yet as we think of it + examine its details we believe it is workable if really tried.”\textsuperscript{123}

In the first year or so after Social Security’s enactment, though, it appeared that Franklin Roosevelt and the key architects of social policy in the New Deal like Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins had been successful in sapping just enough of the Townsend Movement’s energy and grassroots strength to largely defang it at the national level. The fact remained, though, that that Townsend Movement continued to exert substantial influence at the state level, especially in California.\textsuperscript{124} In the words of William Leuchtenburg,

\begin{quote}
\ldots Townsend’s strength reached its apex after the passage of the Social Security Act; in fact, he gained recruits precisely because of the inadequacy of the New Deal pension system, which left millions of elderly Americans unprotected.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

The Social Security Act’s social insurance provisions, while promising to alleviate elderly poverty in the future, did little to address it in the present, as most of its intended beneficiaries were already well past their prime working years.\textsuperscript{126}

As a consequence, unlike Father Coughlin’s National Union for Social Justice or Senator Huey Long’s “Share the Wealth” movements, the Townsend Movement soldiered on despite its repeated defeats at the national level. While George Murray, a Chicago journalist associated with the Movement from 1938-1945, somewhat incredulously claimed that 12,000 Townsend Clubs

\textsuperscript{123} McElvaine, \textit{Down and Out in the Great Depression}, 196.
\textsuperscript{124} Despite the program’s limited scope, the enactment of Social Security did begin a process – dramatically accelerated after the end of both the New Deal era and of World War II – in which many older Americans began to reorient their demands for assistance directly to the national government first rather than to state or local authorities. Such a reorientation was already becoming evident by 1938. As one group of retired workers wrote to President Roosevelt that year, “we wholeheartedly accept Social-Security; visualizing the economic security and attendant contentment it will afford us and millions like us, who otherwise, in an age where the productive years of the average worker is gradually diminishing, would be forced to face an insecure old age not pleasant to contemplate” (Levine, \textit{The People and the President}, 237-238).
\textsuperscript{125} Leuchtenburg, \textit{Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal}, 180.
\textsuperscript{126} As William Leuchtenburg has observed, “by relying on regressive taxation and withdrawing vast sums to build up reserves, the act did untold economic mischief…the act not only failed to set up a national system of unemployment compensation but did not even provide adequate national standards.” (Leuchtenburg, \textit{Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal}, 132).
remained in active operation when he took the realms of the Movement’s newspaper in 1938, it was true that neither the defeat of the Movement nor the enactment of Social Security had put the issue of publicly-supported old age pensions to rest. A 1936 report by the Twentieth Century Fund, for example, while castigating Dr. Townsend and his plan as little better than hucksterism writ large, pointedly conceded that “the strength of the Townsend movement, despite its fallacies…has undoubtedly focused the attention of the country upon the fact that the richest nation of the world has not yet provided adequate economic protection for old age.”

In other words, despite the enactment of Social Security the year before the Twentieth Century Fund’s report, well-informed social welfare experts continued to believe that the problem of old age economic security remained only partially solved. Whatever its other failings as an organization, the Movement had succeeded in focusing national attention on the issue of old-age economic security. The splinter and successor groups which emerged in its wake inherited many of the Movement’s politicized supporters, who continued to press for state-level publicly funded old-age pensions in the late 1930s that were capable of providing a level of economic security that Social Security could not.

The State Level Struggle over Old-Age Economic Security

In particular, these successor groups would prove to be most influential in Colorado and California. The November 1936 elections brought the re-election of Franklin Roosevelt, but it also brought victory and near-victory for old-age pension groups in those two states. In Colorado, voters failed to remove a $40 a month pension system, despite its potentially adverse effects on the

state’s treasury, while in California, old age pension advocates successfully mobilized their supporters to secure the election of a pro-pension Governor and U.S. Senator, despite narrowly losing a popular referendum on a guaranteed state-level $120 a month old-age pension system.\textsuperscript{131} In other states like Oregon and North Dakota, similarly mixed messages from the electorate were also in abundance: while both states’ voters defeated referenda on proposed state-level pension systems, they also were happy to elect new representatives to Congress who had publicly committed themselves to expanding Social Security.\textsuperscript{132}

Such state-level agitation continued throughout the late 1930s, even after the Supreme Court upheld Social Security as constitutional in 1937 and the Roosevelt administration began to cautiously call for the expansion of Social Security in the wake of the Court’s decision, a move that also enjoyed the support of influential think tanks like the Twentieth Century Fund.\textsuperscript{133} While the Roosevelt administration moved tentatively to bolster Social Security, the popular discontent that had powered the Townsend Movement to national prominence continued to register its displeasure. In Colorado, leading elected officials received threatening mail ahead of a pending vote on an old-age pension bill, while in California, old age pension advocates accelerated their efforts to place a new referendum on public pensions before the state’s voters at the earliest opportunity.\textsuperscript{134}

The California movement, which backed a ballot proposal formally titled the “Retirement Life Payment Plan” but more widely known by its colloquial nickname of “Ham and Eggs,” did

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
eventually succeed in placing its proposed pension on the November 1938 ballot in California. However, it failed to persuade a majority of voters to endorse “Ham and Eggs,” and subsequent attempts in 1939 and 1940 also met with failure. Likewise, the political wrangling over old age pensions in Colorado reached a fever pitch in 1938 and became the marquee issue for both elected state and federal politicians in that state. Even in eastern states like New York – where the Townsend Movement had never enjoyed comparably strong grassroots support – there was growing evidence that existing social welfare measures remained insufficient to address the problem of providing economic security in old age. The November 1938 midterm elections revealed that the question of old-age pensions remained a pressing one in many western and Midwestern states. In Colorado, voters overwhelmingly chose to retain the state’s $45 per month old age pension law, while the “Ham and Eggs” movement’s old age referendum was defeated by Californian voters. Elsewhere, state campaigns on behalf of old age pensions in North Dakota, Oregon, Washington State, and Minnesota were showing evidence of growing support which, even if not fully realized in 1938, threatened to ripen into full-fledged social movements in the future.

Observant federal administrators like Arthur J. Altmeyer, the chairman of the Social Security Board, were sufficiently alarmed by these state-level developments that they began to push for

accelerated implementation of Social Security’s old age insurance provision and for an extensive broadening of old age assistance payments already been made by the program.\(^\text{141}\) The *New York Times* took note of the political developments out west, observing in late October 1938 that “not long ago the Townsend Plan was thought to be as dead as Huey Long’s Share the Wealth scheme…but a Washington dispatch in Sunday’s TIMES showed that the doctor’s plan or some modification of it is to be submitted to the voters in seventeen states.” Reading the tea leaves, the *Times* noted that “[congressional] candidates are easily pressed…Nearly a fourth of the last House [of Representatives] was in favor of a bill for a Federal old-age pension of $50 a month…In the next House another demonstration for fatter old-age pensions is plainly to be expected.”\(^\text{142}\) While Dr. Townsend himself opposed the various 1938 state pension proposals – possibly in a pique of anger that the Townsend Movement’s thunder had been stolen by other old-age pension advocacy groups – his rejection of them apparently did little to blunt their popularity.\(^\text{143}\)

Instead, despite repeated defeats at the ballot box, such groups refused to disappear from the nation’s political scene. This surprising resilience owed much to the continued poor economic status of many older Americans, who, as critics of Social Security had predicted, continued to find little if any succor to alleviate their woes from the Social Security program or from other existing public measures.\(^\text{144}\) The dire economic conditions faced by many older Americans was borne out by a March 1938 report commissioned by the Social Security Board which revealed that only 33% of the

\(^3\text{143}\) “Pension Plans at the Polls,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 1938.
aged – defined as people aged 65 and over – were self-supporting; the two-thirds majority continued to depend heavily on “public, private, or family aid.”

In response to the continuing tumultuousness of state-level fights over old age pensions as well as growing concerns that the disparate old-age pension advocacy groups might yet coalesce into a national movement once more, the Roosevelt administration announced its intentions in January 1939 to push for a major extension of the Social Security Act as rapidly as possible. In its coverage of the administration’s move, the New York Times reported that

In a passage generally interpreted as an attack on the Townsend and similar plans the President said: “I cannot too strongly urge the wisdom of building upon the principles contained in the present Social Security Act in affording greater protection to our people, rather than turning to untried and demonstrably unsound panaceas.”

To a large extent, the President was moving in accord with public opinion; a February 1939 Gallup poll revealed that an overwhelming 94% of surveyed voters favored government old-age pensions, and that most voters believed that “the present Social Security Act falls short of providing...an adequate old-age pensions system at this time.” Alongside its interest in the growing public support for increases to Social Security, the Roosevelt administration also tested the waters for other solutions to the problem of old age economic insecurity. In March 1939, a Department of Labor special committee studying the problems of older workers (defined as 40 years or older) recommended that the “federal government lead the attack on the problem of unemployment for

older workers by abolishing age limits for entrance into the government service except for positions requiring physical strength and endurance.”\footnote{End to Age Limit on Jobs Is Urged, The New York Times, March 19, 1939. The U.S. Department of Labor was not alone in its efforts to urge that government set an example for industry by employing older workers and thereby demonstrate that they were not necessarily less efficient than younger workers. New York State enacted legislation in April 1938 which abolished previous civil service age limits for numerous low-level public employment positions. See Hal Borland, “Does Life End at Forty?” The New York Times, January 21, 1940.}

The committee’s recommendations came and went without any action by the Roosevelt administration, but they did represent a new approach to the problem of economic insecurity in old age. If Social Security could not be increased to a sufficiently high level to keep older people out of poverty, then perhaps an alternative solution which kept them employed in the labor market longer could have the same salutary effect. Members of the Social Security Board were already becoming concerned that the costs of raising benefits to Social Security would continue to rise at an unsustainable rate; as one March 1939 Social Security Board report detailed, the total amount expended for old-age assistance between 1937-1938 stood at $360,239,000, with the federal government supplying nearly half of that sum ($174,085,000).\footnote{Alvin Roseman, “Old-Age Assistance,” Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 202 (March 1939): 53-59.} While this percentage only represented approximately 2\% of the federal government’s entire outlays for fiscal year 1938, federal officials and outside observers worried that that proportion could potentially grow much higher if monthly benefit payments were substantially increased or if the number of people enrolled in the Social Security system grew too large.\footnote{In 1938, the federal government’s total outlays stood at roughly $6.84 billion. See U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Fiscal Year 2017: Historical Tables: Budget of the United States Government, Table 1.1 Summary Of Receipts, Outlays, And Surpluses Or Deficits: 1789–2021, p. 27 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2016. (Source URL: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BUDGET-2017-TAB/pdf/BUDGET-2017-TAB.pdf, accessed February 26, 2017).}

As the same 1939 Department of Labor report argued, the political pressure to raise old-age assistance levels would possibly permanently undercut the rationale for social insurance. Consequently, the Social Security Board recommended that old-age assistance funds should be...
allocated only to the truly financially needy elderly rather than made into a universal entitlement for all older people above a certain age, as the Townsend Movement and its successor organizations had advocated for. In order to achieve this outcome, though, the Social Security Board urged that Social Security’s social insurance system be made as universal in coverage as possible, or else the temptation to liberalize and raise old-age assistance payments at both the state and federal levels would soon prove irresistible in the near future.

The brewing political fight over old age pensions in 1939 ultimately resulted in the enactment of amendments to the original Social Security Act that raised benefits, accelerated the payment of old age benefits by two years from January 1, 1942 to January 1, 1940, and extended coverage of Social Security to more groups of workers. The amendments also “added two new categories of benefits: payments to the spouse and minor children of a retired worker (so-called dependents benefits) and survivors benefits paid to the family in the event of the premature death of a covered worker.” As the official legislative history of Social Security observes, “this change transformed Social Security from a retirement program for workers into a family-based economic security program.”

The enactment of the 1939 amendments soon after the original Act was passed, though, was not exactly a planned event. Mounting criticism of Social Security from both the political right and the left convinced the Roosevelt administration of the need to speed up the dispensing of Social Security benefits, a process which was originally scheduled to begin in 1942 but which began

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151 Ibid., 58.
155 Ibid.
instead in 1940 after the 1939 amendments were passed.\textsuperscript{156} As Sung Won Kang has argued, this development would not have been possible without continuing pressure from the Townsend Movement on Congress and the Roosevelt administration.\textsuperscript{157} In particular, the Movement’s clubs continued to organize older Americans and to persuade supportive Congressmen to submit its bills for consideration in the U.S. House of Representatives. While these bills usually never made it out of committee, the Townsend Movement’s persistence – as well as the increasingly widely acknowledged problems surrounding Social Security, which congressional opponents of the Roosevelt administration were all too happy to publicize – persuaded the architects of the original Social Security Act that additional legislation was necessary to relieve some of the still-obvious economic and social discontent among older Americans.\textsuperscript{158}


These improvements, which the Roosevelt administration and most educated observers had hoped would be sufficient to dampen the appeal of the revived old-age pension movements scattered throughout the United States, achieved only limited success in accomplishing that objective.\(^{159}\) Observing the continued agitation over old age pensions, the *Times* noted that, in stark contrast to the 1935 fight over Social Security, “practically no opposition arose in Congress to the proposals for liberalizing the old age security plan” because of “the tremendous pressure...exerted upon the members as the result of the Townsend and general welfare pension movements, together with the

accentuated public interest in the general subject of social security. “160 By expanding Social Security, congressional leaders hoped both to stave off the Movement and to continue sharing the costs of public assistance for the elderly; under Social Security, such costs were shared between the federal government and the individual states, but if the Townsend Plan were enacted, such costs would fall almost entirely upon the federal government. While New Dealers like Frances Perkins were acutely aware of Social Security’s incomplete nature, they hoped that expansion of the program would in time lessen the appeal of the Townsend Movement and other similar groups to insignificance.161

Instead, despite the 1939 improvements to Social Security, the pension movements continued to soldier on in California and elsewhere, including Capitol Hill, where the backers of the Townsend Plan succeeded in forcing a vote on its adoption.162 The overwhelming defeat which these backers suffered – a 302 to 97 loss – seemed to have little effect in deterring the revived Movement; if anything, as the New York Times noted, “it seems likely that Townsendite agitation will continue so long as the country contains a large body of unemployed and the national income level remains below the level where economists say it can go.”163

Events throughout 1939 soon bore out the Times’s prediction. Though it had been defeated again in Congress, the Movement and other old-age pension advocacy groups continued to press their case in various western states.164 In November 1939, the Times reported on special elections being held in California and Ohio to determine the fate of proposed publicly supported old age pension plans in those states, and hinted that similar movements were underway in New England.

161 Ibid.
and New York State. As the Times editorialized, “the general belief…is that the country is still some years away from general pension legislation, but the ranks of those who predict that the country never will accept a general pension program are being decimated by the unceasing gunfire of the pension advocates.”

Unexpectedly, though, the old-age pension proposals fell short in the special state elections held in November 1939. California’s voters rejected – again – the “Ham and Eggs” plan, while voters in Ohio similarly declined to endorse a guaranteed old-age pension for state residents. In a rare showing of bipartisanship, representatives of the leadership in both the Democratic and Republican parties openly celebrated the defeat of the proposed pension plans, as did Abraham Epstein’s American Association for Social Security. The Townsend Movement did not take its latest loss well; speaking before a public audience in Boston the following spring, Dr. Townsend bitterly assailed the New Deal as a “failure,” heaped particular scorn on the Social Security Act as “the worst of all,” and expressed his belief that Social Security would be repealed by 1941.

Even as the official establishment in Washington rejoiced once more in the defeat of the Townsend Movement, the poor economic conditions which the New York Times had identified as the primary cause of the continuing social discontent among older Americans showed no signs of abating. While Social Security’s expansion would help some retirees, its acknowledged inadequacy meant that many more remained dependent upon other public, private, or family aid. The improvements to the Social Security Act, though, allowed the Roosevelt administration to make long-desired changes to other New Deal programs. In December 1939, after a public fracas with Governor A. Harry Moore of New Jersey over the dismissal of workers aged 65 years or older who

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166 Charles R. Michael, “Both Parties Hail Pension Defeats,” The New York Times, November 9, 1939. Undeterred by its defeat in the 1939 special election, the backers of the “Ham and Eggs” pension plan sought the following year to place the plan up for another vote in November 1940. See “New ‘Ham-Eggs’ Vote Sought in California,” The New York Times, April 7, 1940.
had been employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in New Jersey, President Roosevelt personally repudiated the suggestion of a Labor Department committee made earlier in 1939 that the federal government abolish age limits in federal employment as a way to ensure that older workers would find it easier to remain in the workforce. Instead, as the President wrote in his letter, since older workers were eligible for assistance under Social Security’s provisions, the limited number of jobs which the WPA had to offer should be reserved instead for unemployed persons who were not eligible for such assistance.168 In the view of the Roosevelt administration, public employment should be reserved for younger, able-bodied workers, while older, less physically able workers should vacate jobs at the WPA and elsewhere for them.169

The Roosevelt administration’s reasoning for barring older workers from public employment, while strongly protested by Governor Moore and by other state officials, bore the marks of how the persistent economic crisis of the Great Depression had reshaped beliefs and assumptions about the role which older people should play in the nation’s political economy. Ironically, like the Townsendites, the New Dealers had, by the end of the 1930s, come to embrace the belief that the place of older workers was in the home – not the old persons’ home – but rather that the precious limited economic opportunity available in a stagnant economy be reserved for people who had families to support. New Dealers assumed – not entirely without reason – that older people did not have young children to support, and that the combination of Social Security, other public or private assistance, as well as traditional forms of family-based in-kind assistance would be sufficient to keep the majority of elderly people out of poverty, while also making room in the workforce for younger workers who could not fall back on public assistance as easily. Without intending to do so, Social Security’s emphasis on ushering older workers out of the labor force

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169 Ibid.
would make it more difficult for future generations of federal officials to rectify elderly poverty because nearly all future solutions to deal with the issue would, in some way, be obliged to conform to the model of social insurance which the architects of Social Security had preferred and would work diligently to place at the center of the American welfare state during the 1940s and into the 1950s.  

For the moment, though, the fight in statehouses and on Capitol Hill over the fate of old-age pensions entered a period of uneasy stasis beginning in late 1939. The problem of providing economic security in old age remained far from solved, as the constant drip of articles from the *Times* revealed, but no major action on the subject would be taken by federal or state officials for several years. This diminished activity was a direct result of rising domestic employment as the federal government began to ramp up the production of war materials in the expectation that it was a merely a question of when and not if the United States would again be engaged in large-scale foreign wars. Former Townsend Movement manager George Murray later recalled that “the [Townsend] movement was at its height just before the war and went downhill after that. It lost its momentum. The Townsend Plan was a Depression movement. Now it became a pie-baking movement, just old people.”

As was the case for most Americans, older Americans greatly benefitted from the advent of World War II, not the New Deal, which largely eradicated the scourge of mass unemployment from the land. Already Social Security was becoming the centerpiece of the New Deal’s reforms. Despite its shortcomings, the Social Security Act was a potent sign of the New Deal’s commitment to the

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mythical “forgotten man” whom Franklin Roosevelt had discussed in an April 1932 radio address.

As Robert McElvaine has observed, the Social Security Act

[w]as a significant achievement in that it at last acknowledged a modicum of societal responsibility for the care of the aged, unemployed, handicapped, and impoverished. It was also important as a symbolic gesture to demonstrate that Roosevelt’s heart was in the right place, no small accomplishment with a presidential election little more than a year away. Although the Townsend organization continued to thrive for more than a decade, Social Security deflated the movement as a threat to Roosevelt.173

However, while Social Security may have deflected Franklin Roosevelt and his administration away from the popular discontent of some older Americans, it did not actually resolve the problem of widespread economic insecurity in old-age. That insecurity would soon be obscured by the booming wartime economy in which essentially full employment became a fact not a fantasy. The unanticipated changes wrought by mass mobilization on the home front during the course of World War II would revive the question of public responsibility to impoverished older Americans after the war’s conclusion, and re-open a national debate once more on what role – if any – Social Security should play in alleviating elderly poverty and the supply of workers in the labor force.

In sum, while Huey Long’s antics and Father Coughlin’s bombast would devour far more drums of newspaper ink – and consume far more of Franklin Roosevelt’s attention and concern during the 1930s – it was the Townsend Movement that ultimately left a far deeper legacy at all levels of government by helping to organize older middle-class Americans into a mass movement committed to their collective betterment on the basis of their age.174 Summarizing the Townsend Plan, William Leuchtenburg has observed that it “represented the conviction of millions of

173 McElvaine, The Great Depression, 257.
174 McElvaine further observes that “even more significant than the age of the participants were their predominantly middle-class origins. They came from the ranks of the self-employed – small businessmen and farmers – with some skilled workers, but very few unskilled workers and very few wealthy individuals. The Townsendites were, in a word, respectable. Most were reported to want a more reputable candidate than Huey Long...The Townsend Plan was the least radical of the major panaceas offered the American people in the thirties...[it] marked the stage of discontent that many middle-class people had reached by the mid-thirties” (McElvaine, The Great Depression, 243).
Americans that they had to take action themselves in order to restore the country to its former prosperity, and that, if the right formula could be found, they could lift themselves by their own bootstraps.” Eventually, the Townsend Movement became largely irrelevant as a force in national politics – a change brought about more by the return of widespread employment opportunities for older Americans during World War II, rather than by Social Security’s old age insurance and assistance titles.

Still, its rise and fall would serve as a guidepost and warning to successor old age lobbying groups, including the as-yet unborn American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), whose own name echoed Dr. Townsend’s Old Age Revolving Pensions, Ltd. (OARP) organization (the incorporated name of the Townsend Movement). As William Leuchtenburg has noted, the ultimate effect of the Townsend Movement was to unleash “a new force in American politics: the old people...[b]uffeted by the depression...they found in the Townsend clubs a home; in the movement, a sense of unity with other elderly people; in the plan, a cause; and in the crusade, a newfound sense of their political power.” This newfound sense of power did not diminish with the national downfall of Dr. Townsend, but instead persisted at the local and state levels, especially in western states like California and Colorado. The scaffolding erected during the New Deal to

175 Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 105.
176 The persistence of the OARP’s influence at the state and local (rather than simply the national) level of government has largely been overlooked by students of the 1930s and 1940s. For an exception that proves the rule, see Steven Bret Burg, “The Gray Crusade: The Townsend Movement, Old Age Politics, and the Development of Social Security,” Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999. Aside from Burg, the only full-length study of the Townsend Movement are Abraham Holtzman, The Townsend Movement: A Political Study (New York: Bookman Associates, 1963) and more recently Edwin Amenta, When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). An important snippet examination of the Townsend Movement can be found in Arthur Schlesinger, The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval (1960; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 29-42. Burg argues that the OARP served as the main progenitor for old age advocacy groups such as the AARP which formed after it had largely dissolved into a nonentity because of Dr. Townsend’s ability to organize older people into a cohesive and organized bloc, a development which outlived the organization he founded in the 1930s. Despite this considerable accomplishment, the Townsend Movement eventually did fade, both as a political force and as a subject of scholarly study. As Burg observes, “the Townsend Movement suffered the fate of a movement that not only failed but that earned the enmity of liberals challenging the New Deal and conservatives for demanding extravagant pensions. It became an orphan of history, its legacy unwanted and left unclaimed by subsequent activists” (Burg, Old People’s Social Movement Organizations, 4).
177 Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 106.
secure the economic security of older people and to prevent them from falling into penury remained incomplete and unfinished. However, the return of near-full employment as the United States mobilized for entry into World War II camouflaged and obscured this fact. As soon as the wartime demand for labor began to slacken after Japan’s surrender in 1945, the concerns which Townsend and his compatriots had helped to give at least semi-coherent form and organization would have the opportunity to resuscitate once more, and thereby force anew arguments about the role of the state at all levels of government in providing provision to older Americans.

By 1939, the effects of the Great Depression had laid the groundwork for the emergence of the senior state. While Social Security proved to be pleasing to both the Roosevelt administration and to its Southern congressional allies, it offered limited succor to many older Americans, not a few of whom were unlikely to benefit from the old-age insurance program scheduled to go into operation in 1942, seven years after the enactment of the Social Security Act. The Townsend Movement therefore continued to feed off the discontent among older Americans in economically unstable conditions, despite the enactment of amendments to the Social Security Act in 1939, which accelerated the scheduled payment of monthly benefits under the old-age insurance program, as well as the payment of enlarged state-level old-age pensions under Social Security’s old-age assistance program. The Townsend Movement continued its efforts to mobilize and organize older Americans, and achieved its most notable successes in California, where voters authorized a new state-funded old-age pension in addition to benefits created by the Social Security Act.

By the close of the 1930s, therefore, an uneasy environment had come into being in which mass social discontent among many older Americans remained, despite the creation of Social Security and the expansion of state-level efforts to provide more economic security in old age. Additionally, the economic and political crisis of the 1930s had necessitated federal intervention in old-age economic security, as well as increased federal and state cooperation on this issue in order
to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the private social welfare system and extended mass
unemployment. From these building blocks, over the course of the 1940s, the architects of the senior
state would seek to expand Social Security into a truly comprehensive public system that would be
at the center of the nation’s social welfare apparatus.

In so doing, they believed the time had come for lasting reform of social welfare in the
United States, and that the remnants of the old order – its poorhouses and its county poor farms –
would be permanently swept away by a new, more humane system, which could preserve the
dignity of older people without bankrupting individual families or the public treasury. To
accomplish this goal would first require the expansion of Social Security, and second the
cooperation of state and local officials in the administration of Social Security. The senior state in
1939 remained half-formed and incomplete, and its future direction, liberal reformers believed,
would naturally lead to the growing assumption by the federal government of its new-found
responsibilities in the realm of providing sufficient security in old-age for more and more
Americans.
CHAPTER II
In Townsend’s Shadow: Reconstructing Old Age Security, 1939-1950

On the eve of America’s entry into World War II, some of the building blocks of the senior state had come into being, but the coordination between federal, state, local, and private welfare officials that would become its hallmark remained inchoate. With the enactment of Social Security in 1935 and subsequent legislative amendments in 1939, the federal government had begun to play a role in providing old-age economic security to a degree that had not been true since its sponsorship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of thousands of pensions for northern Civil War veterans. The Roosevelt administration had purchased this new role despite its costly price tag; namely, despite the aspirations of New Deal reform-minded liberals, the Social Security system remained far from universal, and its coverage and benefits remained uneven with significant differences among the states.¹

Moreover, the enactment of Social Security had spurred a ferocious response from much of the Republican Party, important segments of the business community, as well as the Townsend Movement and other old-age pension movements in the western United States, which had continued to flourish after 1935.² Though the Social Security Act had passed constitutional muster by the Supreme Court in 1937, it remained unclear what the next steps in its evolution would be.³ Popular

¹“Moves to Expand Old-Age Insurance,” The New York Times, August 15, 1940; Arthur J. Altmeyer, “Toward the Social Security Goal,” The New York Times, August 15, 1937. By October 1938, 1,722,317 people were receiving old-age assistance funds nationwide, or roughly 22 percent of the total population aged 65 years or older. Such old-age assistance funds varied widely on a state-by-state basis. In California, for example, older state residents could expect a relatively generous old-age assistance monthly payment of $32.65, whereas in Mississippi the monthly payment was just $5.65 [both figures 1938 dollars]. See “August Relief Cost Put At $259,100,000,” The New York Times, October 10, 1938.
³ Luther A. Huston, “Social Security Grown to Giant Size in 5 Years,” The New York Times, August 11, 1940. As Huston wrote, “the consensus [in Washington] seems to be that expansion, rather than curtailment, will mark the future course of the program, although changing circumstances and the exigencies of shifting political control may bring alterations in the method of its administration. No one who speaks with the voice of influence has yet asserted that liquidation of such a concern should be attempted.” (Ibid.)
support for the New Deal’s reforms had begun to ebb by this time, as evidenced by the willingness of voters to deliver both houses of Congress back to the traditional ruling conservative coalition of southern Democrats and Republicans after the 1938 primary and general elections.⁴ Surveying the situation in December 1940, John Winchell Riley of the New Jersey College for Women observed in the New York Times that “there has been a steady relative increase in the number of older persons in our population…[a]nd as a nation we haven’t yet learned what to do about this. We have set up old-age pensions and retirement funds, and still we are plagued by the Townsend Plan and its variations.”⁵

At the state and local level, officials wrestled with the demands of voters who continued to agitate for comprehensive action.⁶ Public opinion seemed to militate in favor of more relief for older people: a Gallup poll released in November 1939 revealed that 90% of surveyed voters believed in government old-age pensions and that Social Security benefits be made payable at age 60 rather than 65 (the actual threshold set by the architects of Social Security).⁷ Such sentiments were not limited to formal surveys or polls. In 1938, one million California voters supported a ballot initiative to pay older state residents $60 per month; likewise, in Ohio, nearly half a million voters supported an unsuccessful measure to pay state residents aged 60 years or more a pension of $40 per month; in Arkansas, the state courts vigorously debated the constitutionality of a proposed old-age pension plan; and in Washington state the Washington Old-Age Pension Union campaigned vigorously for an expansion of state welfare programs.⁸

⁴ For more on the Roosevelt administration’s efforts to remake the Democratic Party during the late 1930s, see Susan Dunn, Roosevelt’s Purge: How FDR Fought to Change the Democratic Party (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). For the late 1930s swing to political conservatism, see Charles R. Michael, “Both Parties Hail Pension Defeats,” The New York Times, November 9, 1939.
Feeling the budgetary pinch, state and local officials from Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York pled their case in January 1938 to federal officials in Washington for further assistance with public assistance rolls, which had continued to rise despite the enactment of old-age and unemployment insurance. In New York alone, statewide relief cases had risen from 268,139 in November 1937 to 304,711 in December 1937. This increase proved especially distressing to New York state welfare officials, who had regarded needy persons past the age of 65 not as “permanent charges” but rather as individuals “who might be expected to return to self-support when jobs were available.” Further west, state officials in Wisconsin reported in the spring of 1938 that Social Security had failed to reduce old-age dependency and enrollment in county poor farms, where enrollment had remained steady at 40,000 people between 1935 and 1938.

The continued poor economic conditions and dependence of thousands of older people upon state and federal assistance thereby nudged local, state, and federal officials into close cooperation. In some localities like New York City and Westchester County, New York, federal funding accounted for 75% of all old-age assistance funds disbursed to recipients by 1941, and state and local officials were loath to lose access to such funds. With no obvious end in sight to the Depression, local, state, and federal welfare officials had come to appreciate the virtues of cooperation, especially given the looming specter of popular discontent. Noting that New York City had benefitted from such cooperation, New York City Welfare Commissioner William B. Hodson observed in November 1937 that “the first thing that the Federal, State, and city partnership has

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done is to enable us to care for nearly twice as many aged persons without any increase in the sum appropriated by the city.” Indeed, New York City benefitted as well from generous W.P.A. allocations, which ensured that over 80,000 older New York City residents – almost entirely workers aged forty years and older – remained employed on the W.P.A.’s rolls.

The growing alliance among public welfare officials on the local, state, and federal level – at least on the question of old-age economic security – also drew strength from the refusal by some surviving private welfare agencies to offer much assistance to the destitute elderly. As William H. Matthews, the director of New York’s Community Service Society observed in April 1939, “[the] private agencies were doing little to aid the aged because they regarded them as a government responsibility.” In New York State, at least, private welfare agencies had considered public old-age pensions to have released them from their obligations to the elderly poor; the long-established Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor, in particular, had previously celebrated the enactment of New York State’s old age pension in 1931 as a tremendous lightening of the financial burdens it faced in trying to assist the growing population of needy elderly people in the state. The enactment of Social Security and the assumption by the federal government of these burdens further shifted the responsibility away from private welfare agencies and local authorities, who seemed relieved and delighted by the federal largesse.

In sum, some of the senior state’s elements were becoming more coherent. On the one hand, there was now newly created federal authority and funding for old-age economic relief; on the other

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hand, this new federal funding soon found its way to existing state and local welfare offices and programs, though this interaction between federal, state, and local authorities was probably most apparent in New York City.\(^\text{18}\) Yet the range of problems faced by the elderly that were addressed by this growing cooperation remained limited: older people were still primarily a budgetary problem, and the best solution to that problem remained finding a way to support them that did not bankrupt the state or threaten to rob self-dignity away from now indigent but formerly middle-class older people. Other issues such as ensuring access to regular medical care or long-term assisted care were scarcely mentioned.

The development of the senior state thus was uneven during the 1940s, both in terms of geography (New York City and California already had an extensive public welfare system, but Louisiana and Mississippi did not), funding, and range of services.\(^\text{19}\) These limitations were not necessarily seen as permanent features; indeed, welfare officials and academic experts confidently assumed that Social Security’s further expansion would take place in due time, and that the issue of providing economic security in old-age would become the near-exclusive provenance of public welfare, with issues of funding, responsibility and administration divvied up among local, state, and federal authorities. But the failure to expand Social Security and the continuing inadequacy of Social Security, state old-age pensions, and other extant mechanisms for providing economic security in old age would necessitate public welfare authorities reaching out to their private sector counterparts in order to supplying assistance to vulnerable elderly people.

In late November 1945, the New York Times held a radio forum on the needs of older people in New York City. The program, which was broadcast live throughout the five boroughs, gathered a

\(^\text{18}\) Besides the availability of federal funds, state and local authorities also benefitted from newly-available data collected and provided by the Social Security Board that helped them to prevent “chiseling” (i.e. people filing for duplicative forms of assistance that they may or may have been entitled to receive). See “Localities to Get U.S. Pension Data,” The New York Times, December 21, 1939.

\(^\text{19}\) “Asks Sliding Scale for Old-Age Relief,” The New York Times, June 5, 1939.
variety of social welfare experts and public officials, some of whom were battle-tested veterans of the New Deal while others were still fresh from the halls of academia. The panelists suggested that the needs of older people could not be met solely by increasing their economic security and purchasing power as mass consumers. Instead, older people wanted “better housing facilities,” “more recreational facilities,” and “a new public attitude recognizing their individuality” in order to make their lives worthy of being lengthened.

Such concerns were both longstanding and novel: on the one hand, rising public disgust at the condition of public poorhouses had helped lay the groundwork for the rise of the old-age pension movement in the 1930s; on the other, the interest in “recreational facilities” and a new public attitude towards the elderly were two issues that had not previously been a major subject of concern for either old-age pension advocates or their opponents. The Townsend Movement had primarily conceived of the elderly as an overlooked audience of citizens and consumers who, if given sufficient purchasing power via pensions, would be able to initiate a virtuous economic cycle in which their spending would stimulate new sources of market demand for consumer goods while simultaneously ensuring that new jobs for younger Americans would be available, either due to economic expansion or because such positions had been vacated by now-pensioned elderly people.

While this emphasis on the elderly as consumers did not dissipate entirely in the postwar era, social workers, public welfare officials and academic experts increasingly focused on the elderly as a group of individuals who merited the expansion of social service programs and agencies in both the private and public sectors. This long-term shift away from considering the elderly solely as economic actors was partly a delayed reaction to one of the major grievances of the Townsend Movement and other old-age advocacy groups: namely, that if the elderly lacked sufficient

21 Ibid.
economic power, they would also lose social stature in time. To turn Linda Gordon’s phrase, the elderly supporters of Dr. Townsend wanted to be entitled but not pitied: they wanted guaranteed old-age pensions as well as respect from other, younger members of American society. The repeated defeats of the Townsend Movement at the national level had not eradicated this desire. If anything, it had shifted it to the state and local levels, where the intense struggle over public and private provision for the elderly would heat up to a degree in the late 1940s that it had not reached since the nadir of the Great Depression in 1933.

In particular, these debates would increasingly occupy center stage in three separate arenas: academia, national politics, and labor-management relations, and ultimately, they would help to catalyze the construction of the senior state at the local and state levels of government by a coalition of elected officials, voluntary welfare organizations, and other interested parties who wanted to ensure social stability by providing the elderly with a role in society that did not impinge too heavily upon the ability of private employers to nudge workers toward retirement or place the public treasury in too great a danger of imminent bankruptcy due to unsustainable pensions. Essentially, during the 1940s, the sluggish, limited reforms made at the national level and the high stakes clashes between organized labor and corporate management eventually helped facilitate the haphazard creation of new programs for older Americans at the state and local levels. As I will address more fully in a subsequent chapter, these efforts were most pronounced in localities like New York City, where city and state officials grew increasingly concerned that the growing population of older people represented an unsustainable financial burden upon local welfare resources. In response, New York officials sought new solutions to the problem of old-age poverty including the construction of subsidized public housing and enactment of legislation to curb age-based discrimination in employment in New York State. Similar efforts were undertaken elsewhere
– particularly in California, which, like New York, had a large resident concentrated population of older people that dwarfed the population of numerous other U.S. states.22

**Back to the States**

In order to understand the development of the senior state at the local and state levels of government, though, it is necessary to put it within the context of larger national politics. Ironically, the failed efforts at the national level during the 1940s to enact national health insurance, along with slow, piecemeal expansions of Social Security, helped to broaden and transform the policy agenda for older Americans sought by the emerging coalition of academic experts, elected officials, and voluntary organizations. Previously, long-time old-age pension advocacy groups as varied as Abraham Epstein’s American Association for Social Security and the Townsend Movement had emphasized the enactment of old-age pensions as a panacea which would eradicate old-age poverty while guaranteeing true economic security and protection from the vicissitudes of old-age, disability, and unemployment. The enactment of Social Security in 1935 and its accelerated rollout in 1940 offered partial relief on this issue.

However, rising health care costs greatly strained the ability of many older people to pay for such care, and the Social Security Act’s prohibition against its funds being used to pay for costs associated with lodging in public poorhouse left them, their families, and their communities with

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limited options. Increasingly, during the 1940s and into the 1950s, the main objectives sought by the senior state’s architects broadened to include both income and health security in old age. Other goals – including better housing, access to adult education programs, and expansion of long-term care facilities – would eventually become part of this agenda, as city and local officials debated how best to provide government services to older people in a way that did not debase them by appearing to be undeserved charity. Taken collectively, these goals added up to a dedicated effort to secure the economic and social independence of older people without sacrificing other social welfare objectives.

In essence, the senior state’s creators sought to enact a broad agenda that would prevent the needy elderly from becoming “dependent” upon public assistance, but to do so in a way that did not place too onerous a burden upon limited local and state resources. In this pursuit, they would be only partially successful, and would turn to other community and voluntary organizations such as private philanthropies and organized labor to help fund and administer local initiatives. In areas where state and local officials could find and establish strong partnerships, such as New York City and Chicago, these efforts were relatively successful. In other, less developed parts of the country –

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23 For more on Social Security’s connection to poorhouse funding, see Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 132. For more information about the impact of rising health care costs on the economic resources of older people before the enactment of Medicare in 1965, see Elizabeth A. Longford, “Medical Care Costs for the Aged: First Findings of the 1963 Survey of the Aged,” *Social Security Bulletin*, July 1964, 1-8. Available at: https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v27n7/v27n7p3.pdf (Accessed March 1, 2017). The leading factor in rising health care costs for older people was short-term hospitalization, which included charges made by hospitals but not by physicians or surgeons. Self-reported data collected by the Social Security Administration revealed that “almost a fourth of the aged couples had at least, one member hospitalized, and nearly 15 percent of the non-married persons reported at least one stay in a general or other short-stay (special) hospital. In numbers, these two groups totaled about 2.5 million aged units. Nearly 640,000-just about 1 in 4 of the hospitalized units-turned to public assistance or some other agency for help in meeting the costs of needed care.” (Ibid., 7).

24 In New York City, welfare officials began to work more closely in the early 1950s with the Community Service Society to promote new community and recreational centers in the state designed specifically for older people as well as public housing designated for older city residents. The William Hodson Recreation Center in the Bronx was perhaps the most prominent example of a successful recreation center for older people in New York City. See Warren Moscow, “Community Study of Aged Stressed,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 1950. State and city officials also explored expansion of the city’s Day Centers for the Aging and to remove limitations on the amount of public housing units that could be set aside for the elderly. See “Age Job Bias Law Urged for State,” *The New York Times*, December 15, 1950. See also “State Bills Stress Problems of Aging,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 1952.
in particular, much of the American South – such efforts were much more limited, and Social Security’s old age assistance program remained the primary source of publicly available old-age economic support. This turn to local solutions and improvisations, though, drew much of its urgency from the underdevelopment of the Social Security system and the failure to enact national health insurance in the late 1940s, a turn of events that led local and state officials to seek alternative arrangements.

The senior state’s evolution during the 1940s and 1950s, was unexpected, given the trajectory which New Deal (and later Fair Deal) liberals had originally hoped for during World War II and in the immediate aftermath of the war. For their part, New Deal reformers continued to hope that a more complete expansion of the Social Security Act’s old-age social insurance provisions would permanently put the issue of economic insecurity in old age to rest. Elite opinion reflected this worry. When the first Social Security checks were mailed in February 1940, the *New York Times* commented that

> Yesterday, when elderly men and women who had established their claims received their first checks from the Government, the Federal old-age pension system was launched in earnest. It is a curious fact that, though, the legislation establishing the plan was passed nearly five years ago, and though tax payments have been building up the reserves for it for three years, the Townsendites, ham-and-egggers and other old age pension extremists have been conducting their propaganda just as if no such actual plan were in existence or in contemplation. The actual flow of checks, let us hope, will bring this situation to an end, and future discussion will recognize the realities.25

Essentially, the *Times* considered the subject of old-age pensions to be settled, and that Social Security’s enactment and its implementation to have been the final word on the matter. Yet there were nagging hints that the *Times* had been perhaps overly optimistic in its 1940 assessment of the situation. A year later, the *Times* conceded in a July 1941 editorial that “no doubt it would be a

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better country if all elderly Americans enjoyed economic security without being obligated to their children. But until the Hitler problem is disposed of the country can bear up under the reproach that a considerable number of elderly Americans...have to turn for help to a son or go to live with a married daughter.”26

The NRPB and the Senior State

As its own editorial suggested, the New York Times believed that resolving the issue of old-age pensions would need to be postponed until global affairs were more tranquil. Even though the United States was not officially at war when the Times published its editorial on old-age pensions in 1941, the Roosevelt administration had already begun the process of ramping up defense production, which resulted in plummeting unemployment rates. As the acrimonious pre-war debates about social policy increasingly took a backseat to wartime preparations, the Roosevelt administration kept an eye on the need to plan for the postwar period. In September 1941, the New York Times reported on the activities of the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB), a small advisory council originally established in 1939 by the Roosevelt administration. In its initial reports, the NRPB argued for the need to plan for full employment, but to do so in a way that would not require “the aged” to work, should they so desire to leave the workforce.27 Sparse details were supplied to the Times’s reporter about how the NRPB planned to provide for elderly people who no longer wished to work but did not want to starve, either.

In the coming months, the NRPB and the Roosevelt administration began to fill in some of the details. At the end of September 1941, President Roosevelt announced his intention to “send a special message to Congress soon requesting that the social security program be enlarged to provide

27 Ibid.

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protection for a much greater number of individuals than are now covered.” 28 In what would later become a catechism of postwar liberalism, the Roosevelt administration asked for favorable Congressional action to expand Social Security to include more workers, and also asked for Congress to expand Social Security’s old-age assistance program to raise the pensions received by elderly residents of poorer, more rural (and generally Southern) states.29

Congress, though, declined the President’s request. The regnant conservative coalition on Capitol Hill saw no reason to act favorably on the President’s message, and instead ignored it. The President chose not to press Congress on the subject, opting to defer the matter to another day. Roosevelt’s cautious approach to Congress did not seem to alarm liberals, some of whom boldly believed and hoped that a return to the New Deal’s reforming heyday was at hand. Boldly setting forth “the outlines of an expanded program,” first and second generation New Dealers like Arthur J. Altmeyer, I.S. Falk, and Wilbur J. Cohen, seized upon Franklin Roosevelt’s words in 1942 reaffirm the necessity of social security. Prophetically, though, this coterie of New Dealers argued that

> Social security cannot be achieved wholly by formal, government disciplines just as it cannot be achieved wholly without those disciplines. The failure of non-governmental programs of social security to meet the major depression of the early 1930’s must not be accepted as indicating they have no place at all in the American way of life. As a matter of fact, attention should be drawn to the fact that the possibilities of encouraging and fostering group programs of social security have been almost completely overlooked in the landslide of legislation and administration which has resulted from the great depression.30

By acknowledging that “non-governmental programs of social security” should have a role in the “American way of life,” these New Deal liberals were extending an olive branch to voluntary organizations and charities, though it was predicated upon the understanding that a broader social

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29 Ibid.
security system would be first among equals in the postwar social welfare order. As the authors of *War and Post-War Social Security* noted, “security in the availability of employment is the heart of the security problem. If the problem of maximum production is solved, most of the other social problems of security are capable of solution. If the problem of full employment cannot be solved, none of the others can be adequately solved.”31 Fatefully, the problem of “full employment” would only be partially solved.32 Despite spirited attempts by liberals in Congress to enact legislation that would provide for a broad expansion of Social Security as well as meaningful federal guarantees of full employment, such attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, and the development of Social Security into a broader program was in essence halted.33

This turn of events, though, was scarcely foreseen by liberals during World War II, who confidently assumed that the Roosevelt administration would ultimately throw its considerable weight behind a concerted effort to expand Social Security and other elements of the New Deal’s reform agenda. The NRPB’s increasingly numerous reports urging the postwar establishment of “a new bill of rights” including “the right to security, with freedom from fear of old age, want, dependency, sickness, unemployment, and accident” probably lent considerable weight to this belief.34 In particular, the reports, while bearing the imprint of the entire board, were in reality largely the work of Dr. Eveline Burns, a British émigré and trained economist who had been a professor of social work at Columbia University. Burns, who had also served on the 1934

31 Ibid., 3.
Committee on Economic Security which had been responsible for the authorship of the original Social Security Act, had been deeply influenced and impressed by the development of the British welfare state, and believed that the time was opportune for the United States to adopt broader social welfare policies to secure and strengthen the New Deal’s promise of economic security.35

From her position as the chief of the NRPB’s Economic Security and Health Section, Burns was ultimately responsible for the NRPB’s most important report, entitled “Security, Work, and Relief Policies,” released in 1942. “Security, Work, and Relief Policies” proposed a sweeping reconstruction of the American welfare state in a manner similar to the framework drawn up in the United Kingdom by Lord William Beveridge, an academic economist and social reformer. The Beveridge Report was released in November 1942 and quickly enjoyed substantial support from the British public, who viewed the Report’s proposed reforms as a worthy future reward for the trials and travails of wartime Britain.

The American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) cautiously added its voice to the NRPB’s. A.F.L. President William Green increasingly began to sound the alarm that “an inadequate social security program would mean that at least one-half of the population would be ‘on the dole,’” a message which was soon echoed by voluntary organizations in New York and elsewhere.36 In a lengthy January 1943 letter to the editor of the New York Times, W.H. Matthews, the Director of the Community Service Society of New York, expressed similar arguments, observing that

[a]s our national security administrators and others who sit in high places plan for a society where security shall be assured to every one [sic] in this world from ‘the cradle to the grave’ one can but wish that they would come down to earth long enough to make life a bit more

livable to our present aged people...The vision of future Utopias should not blind us to unjust, harmful realities of the present.\textsuperscript{37}

Matthews and other leaders of private voluntary organizations did not have to wait much longer to find out just what the “national security administrators and others who sit in high places” had planned for American society.

Unlike the positive response that Lord Beveridge’s plan had received in Britain, though, the NRPB’s report met with a cool reaction from the Roosevelt administration, which released it without much fanfare in March 1943.\textsuperscript{38} It was perhaps unsurprising that the response from both Congress and the general public was decidedly underwhelming. Moreover, the Congress that received the NRPB’s report, though, was a far different beast than the one which had ratified the Social Security Act in 1935. In 1942, conservative southern Democrats and Republicans had scored important victories in the midterm elections held that year, which had simultaneously weakened the administration’s ability to push for more liberal domestic legislation and increased its dependence upon southern Democrats for passage of defense spending and other measures related to American involvement in World War II. Energized congressional conservatives had succeeded in pressuring the Roosevelt administration to dismantle the celebrated Work Projects Administration (W.P.A.) even before the new Congress met in January 1943, and had their eyes set on eliminating other New Deal agencies and programs.\textsuperscript{39} Though the NRPB was a small agency, its ideological kinship with the New Deal’s reformist impulse made it a prominent target for members of Congress who were


eager to remove and dismantle any New Deal programs which envisioned a continuing role for the federal government to play in planning the nation’s political economy.

Consequently, when Congress did eventually respond to the NRPB’s reports, it acted not to implement them but rather to cut the NRPB’s funding down to the bone. As the *New York Times* noted in its coverage of Congress’s response, “the temper of Congress is such that it is in revolt against what it calls “government by directive.” Within a month of FDR’s transmission of the NRPB’s report, the NRPB was engaged in a fight for its very existence. The House of Representatives’ Appropriations Committee had voted to eliminate its funding in February; now the Senate appeared to be poised to concur with that action. Ultimately, the Senate relented, but only partially; instead of its previous annual appropriation of $1.4 million, the NRPB would now have to make do with $200,000 instead. Having narrowly escaped the fate of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the NRPB thereafter pressed on, now significantly emaciated for lack of funds and muscular support from the Roosevelt administration, which seemed almost too eager at times to bury and forget the half-dead agency.

**The Townsend Movement, Redux**

As Congress moved to squelch the NRPB, developments elsewhere in the nation were bearing out the warnings sounded earlier by the A.F.L. and other organizations with a vested stake in seeing the federal government make significant improvements to the nation’s social security

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41 Ibid.
system. In the ten years since the emergence of the Townsend Movement in 1935, California had remained a focal point in the struggle by the Townsendites and other old-age pension advocacy movements to enact a state-level old-age pension. This continuing struggle remained largely confined to California, but it continued to attract attention from concerned observers that successful enactment of an overly generous old-age pension in California might inspire older people in other states to organize and campaign for similar measures elsewhere. After repeated defeats at the ballot box between 1938 and 1942, California’s motley coalition of old-age pension advocacy groups shifted tactics and instead worked to exert pressure on the state’s legislators to improve the state’s old-age pension system.

These efforts succeeded in May 1943, when the California Legislature approved a bill that increased the state’s monthly pension maximum by roughly 25%, from $40 to $50 per month. Governor Earl Warren signed the measure into law, but the state’s organized and still-restive old-age pension movement remained unsatisfied with the improvements. This development served only to fuel the fears of the state’s political establishment, which remained seriously concerned that the state would have to face once more the return of a Townsend Movement-style political drama.

45 Besides the Townsend Movement, the most significant old-age pension movement in California during the 1930s was the “Ham and Eggs” movement. The Ham and Eggs movement sought the enactment of a $120 monthly old-age pension, to be paid out at $30 increments once per week to all Californians over the age of 50. See Daniel J.B. Mitchell, “The Lessons of Ham and Eggs: California’s 1938 and 1939 Pension Ballot Propositions.” Southern California Quarterly 82, no. 2 (2000): 193-218. See also Kevin Starr, Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 206; David Hackett Fischer, Growing Old in America: The Bland-Lee Lectures Delivered at Clark University (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 179.

46 As Seymour E. Harris of the New York Times observed in July 1949, “our current Social Security program offering $25 monthly to an insured retired worker without family will not take care of the old. If the old are worth preserving, the country should provide them with a decent standard. As their numbers and political power increase, they will take the matter into their own hands.” Seymour E. Harris, “What to do with 18 million aged?,” The New York Times, July 10, 1949.


48 As Jackson K. Putnam notes, California’s state pension situation was further exacerbated by the 1941 enactment of a “special needs” policy by the California legislature “whereby a person whose income was too high to qualify him for a pension could secure a pension anyway if he had special needs, such as medical care, whose cost would otherwise burden him.” (Jackson K. Putnam, Old-age Politics in California: From Richardson to Reagan (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1970), 130. This policy in turn “made many more persons eligible for pensions and kept the rolls
Their fears were well-grounded. By late October 1943, California was paying approximately $90,000,000 per year (approximately $1.2 billion in 2016 dollars) to support its needy aged citizens, a sum that greatly exceeded that spent by New York State or Ohio, both of which were more populous than California. Moreover, the wartime tightening of the labor market in California had had only a limited effect on lowering the demand for old-age pensions. In December 1941, 158,723 elderly Californians had received old age pensions; this figure had dropped to 151,412 in May 1943, but had rebounded back up to 153,412 by October 1943, and was continuing to rise. A year later in October 1944, California voters defeated an attempt by re-organized members of the Townsend Movement to enact a new, higher pension for citizens aged 60 or over that would have provided a guaranteed $60 per month, largely due to the pension’s proposed funding mechanism, which would have instituted a new 3 percent gross income tax.

California was not the only place in which signs of restlessness among organized old-age groups were becoming more apparent. Back on the East Coast, the Welfare Council of New York City had reported in June 1943 that “a half million aged persons in New York are being neglected,” and that old-age assistance monthly cash grants were continuing to rise due to the city’s increasing elderly population. Thus far, this growing population of “neglected” elderly people had not

large.” Even before the California legislature’s demonstration of generosity in 1941, California’s state pensions were considerably more generous than those available in much of the rest of the nation. According to Floyd A. Bond’s calculations, in 1940 the average cost of state old-age pensions to each employed worker in the United States was $10.52, whereas in California it was $25.74; in 1950 the respective figures were $25.99 and $58.30.” See Floyd A. Bond et. al., Our Needy Aged: A California Study of a National Problem (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1954), 218-248; quoted in Putnam, Old-age Politics in California, 130.

attempted to organize and press for a more generous old-age pension – as had happened in California – but it remained an issue of concern.

As the A.F.L. had predicted before the submission of the NRPB’s report to Congress, though, the problem of old-age economic dependency was already reasserting itself. While the heightened demand for labor during World War II provided older Americans, especially those still in or trying to re-enter the workforce, with unexpectedly bountiful employment opportunities, it had only obscured for a time the fundamental weaknesses of the Social Security system in providing adequate income maintenance to older people. Evidence of the temporary effect of labor shortage during World War II on employment patterns among older men were revealed in a postwar report produced by the U.S. Department of Labor. Between 1890 and 1940, the percentage of older men aged 65 and over in the workforce had declined from nearly 70 percent to just over 40 percent. But between 1940 and 1945, this figure rose back to 50 percent, and then resumed its long-term decline. By 1950, the figure had dropped once more to approximately 45 percent.

Additionally, of the approximately 825,000 men over the age of 65 who were eligible to receive Social Security benefits in 1941, 585,000 – roughly 71.1% of the total – had deferred acceptance of Social Security in order to remain at their jobs, suggesting that most eligible older men preferred to remain employed full-time rather than retire and receive Social Security payments. Even though the Roosevelt administration had set the NRPB’s report aside, its arguments reflected just how dramatically participation in World War II had altered perceptions of

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53 “U.S. Employment Highest Since ’29: N.A.M. Survey of Key Defense Cities Shows Relief Rolls Reduced by Half,” The New York Times, July 30, 1941. As a federal government report later stated, “more than half of all men aged 65 and over were in the labor force [during World War II] because of liberalized hiring and retirement policies prevailing in industry. See Background Statement, Section III, National Conference on Aging, 1950.


the American economy. Instead of the “mature” economy thesis which had formed the central assumption of many New Dealers during the Great Depression, the NRPB’s members optimistically reported instead that the United States could “plan for a dynamic expanding economy on the order of 100 to 125 billions national income…It has taken total war to reveal to us the capacity of our production machine, once it is fully energized…Little vision is required to see that our production machine can be made to produce plenty for peace as well as plenty for war.”56 As part of its broad set of proposals to the President, the NRPB recommended “extension of coverage of Old Age and Survivors Insurance and continuing efforts to provide more adequate minimum benefits” as well as the “creation of an adequate general public assistance system through Federal financial aid for general relief available to the States on an equalizing basis and accompanied by Federal standards.”57

Implicitly, these recommendations recognized and acknowledged the deficiencies of the Social Security system as it then existed: namely, it did not cover enough people, and the people who were eligible to receive support from it did not receive nearly enough to sustain meaningful economic security. As the NRPB had noted in the “Equal Access to Economic Security” section of its 1943 report, “although social insurance programs now protect a substantial proportion of the population against loss of income due to temporary or permanent impairment of earning power, we have failed to make full use of this convenient and popular security device.”58 In other words, the federal government was doing relatively little to combat economic insecurity in old age, despite the fact that such a goal had been at the heart of the New Deal’s rhetoric to boost collective economic security through the use of state power.

57 Ibid., 17.
58 Ibid., 77.
Perhaps aware of this discrepancy, Roosevelt had publicly shied away from further specific
comment on the NRPB’s fate or the broader subject of economic security until January 1944, when
he publicly committed himself once more to using the federal government’s resources to wage the
great fight for economic security for all Americans, including the elderly.59 In his 1944 State of the
Union Address, in which he famously called for a second Bill of Rights focused on economic
security, Roosevelt pointedly listed “the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old
age, sickness, accident, and unemployment” as one of the key rights and “economic truths” which
he described as “self-evident.”60 While soaring in rhetoric, the President’s words failed to have
much of an effect on Congress, which continued to ignore the President’s proposals. By the time of
the President’s death in April 1945, the fate of his proposed second Bill of Rights remained opaque
at best.

What was becoming clear in the months that followed was that the return of peace also
meant the return of unemployment for millions of surplus war workers, who were no longer
necessary to keep the blast furnace of industrial production burning at a feverish pace.61 The
underdevelopment of Social Security as a mechanism for preventing economic insecurity – and
thereby arresting the impoverishment of older people who were no longer actively employed – was
becoming obvious by 1946.62 Only 33 per cent of the aged in the United States could be classified
as self-supporting; the remainder was “either helped or supported by relatives and friends and by

59 Franklin D. Roosevelt: “Excerpts from the Press Conference,” December 28, 1943. Online by Gerhard Peters and
September 29, 2016); Franklin D. Roosevelt: “State of the Union Message to Congress,” January 11, 1944. Online by
(accessed September 29, 2016).
60 Franklin D. Roosevelt: “State of the Union Message to Congress,” January 11, 1944. Online by Gerhard Peters and
September 29, 2016).
62 A.H. Raskin, “Relief for Aged Soars in U.S. As Social Security Falls Short: Number Receiving Aid Found to Be
1946.
public agencies or private philanthropy…most homes for the aged, both private and public, have staggering waiting lists.”

That figure of dependent elderly people was the same as it had been in 1941, when Social Security was entering its first year of operation, and its persistence suggested that Social Security was having a marginal effect at best on lessening poverty among older people.

In response to this fact finding, public attention began to turn once more to the issue of how to best preserve the economic security of older Americans. At times, these discussions took on alarmist tones. *The New York Times* portrayed the growing number of older people as a looming threat to the vitality of American society. This threat was the prospect of a rapidly aging population, courtesy of “a comparatively slow population growth,” which could lead to population decline in the long-term.

The *Times*, though, was not alone in fearing the worst if nothing was done. As J.C. Capt, the Director of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, warned in 1946, “the principal change will be in the character of the dependency problem rather than its size. The shift from young-age to old-age dependency calls for careful planning of ways and means to discharge the altered responsibility efficiently, economically, and equitably.”

In order to prevent “the dependency problem” from metastasizing, Capt urged the adoption of “programs of retraining for older workers, special job placement services, and possibly publicity campaigns aimed at fuller utilization of this segment of the labor supply.”

In addition, as the *Times* editorialized in December 1946, “the present [social security] system needs a fundamental overhauling to make it universally operative on a basis that

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64 For 1941 figure, see “60% Over Age 65 Not Self-Supporting: Dr. Shearon Tells Senators Old-Age Groups Are Dependents,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 1941.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
will enable aged persons to retire and keep body and soul together without the humiliation of applying for supplementary relief.”\textsuperscript{68} In its annual report two months later, the Social Security Board concurred with the \textit{Times}’s findings, and urged Congress to extend Social Security to more workers and make its provisions more generous.\textsuperscript{69}

Congress’s response was to increase the amount of aid funneled to poorer states under Social Security’s old age assistance provisions. While this action benefitted largely rural and Southern states, it did little to help California or other states facing a restive and resurgent old-age pension movement.\textsuperscript{70} The unresolved impasse over providing economic security in old age through Social Security and other public means soon contributed to the resumption of protracted conflict in labor-management relations, which organized labor had, under duress from the federal government, largely suspended during the course of World War II. Walter Reuther and other labor leaders had labored mightily to navigate the perilous shoals of public opinion, the wartime Roosevelt administration, and newly energized corporate management as they tried to ensure that workers in the wartime labor force received a fair return for their efforts.\textsuperscript{71} The holding pattern which resulted lasted for the duration of the war, as organized labor feared alienating its sometime allies in the Roosevelt administration by risking any sort of large-scale action to demand higher wages or better


\textsuperscript{71} As Reuther’s biographer Nelson Lichtenstein has observed, “by mid-1942 it was clear that wartime collective bargaining had turned into little more than a holding action.” Nelson Lichtenstein, \textit{Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit}, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 199.
compensation. Such concerns were deferred, a development that would later come back to haunt Reuther and other labor leaders.

**Postwar Developments**

The political and social situation during the first few postwar years therefore remained fragile. At the national level, both labor and management had benefitted from the ramped up defense needs of the nation during World War II, but business had arguably benefitted more because it had been able to restore much of its ability to shape the currents of American politics. Moreover, the impasse at the national level over programs like Social Security merely meant that the still unresolved issue of economic insecurity – especially for older Americans – was left at the doorstep of individual states, local communities, and other actors, of which the organized labor movement was the most prominent. As J. Douglas Brown, a Princeton University economist and one of the chief architects of the 1935 Social Security Act argued in a 1946 interview with the *New York Times*, “the great cause of bitterness in labor relations today was not wages as such, but the sense of insecurity felt by workers as human beings.”

According to Brown, “problems such as sickness benefits, medical care, pension plans and dismissal payments remain fundamental causes of rancor in bargaining negotiations, despite the Government’s social security program.”

Deeply cognizant of the very real limitations of Social Security to promote broad economic security, various factions within the organized labor movement attempted to use their newly strengthened position within the nation’s political economy to push for a more fully developed welfare state, the broad contours of which had been outlined by Franklin Roosevelt and other New Dealers. Despite unprecedented membership strength, organized labor’s ability to challenge the wartime alliance forged between the federal government and a revitalized business community was

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73 Ibid.
considerably more limited than labor leaders probably wished it to be. Sensing that the political winds were shifting after the end of World War II, Walter Reuther and other labor leaders publicly made the case for higher wages as a necessary component of the nation’s political economy to ensure that mass purchasing power would not be weakened, lest the factors which had made the Depression possible begin to take root once more.

Moreover, “the wartime economic experience had discredited the Depression-era idea that the U.S. economy had become ‘stagnant’ or ‘mature’ and replaced such pessimism with a vision of limitless postwar growth.” As Robert M. Collins has written:

The coming of World War II resolved the ambivalence of the Depression era, tipping the balance decisively away from the economics of scarcity and toward economic expansion. The goals of balance and recovery gave way to the pursuit of all-out production and full employment.

In other words, the economic conditions that had contributed to the on and off partnership between organized labor and the New Deal had been replaced by a political order in which organized labor, which had benefitted from the New Deal’s emphasis on restoring “balance” in arranging the

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74 As Nelson Lichtenstein has observed, “by 1945 America’s large business corporations had gone a long way toward re-legitimizing their role as autonomous and efficient generators of the nation’s wealth.” See Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 221.
75 Ibid., 221-222.
76 Ibid., 221. The fear of economic depression once peace returned was an ever-present concern for economic planners during World War II. See Thomas C. Blaisdell, Jr., “Can We Avoid a Post-War Depression?: Dislocation is certain, but adequate steps promptly taken can prevent serious difficulties,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 1943. See also Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage, 1995). Brinkley argues that the “end of reform” which had characterized the early New Deal years (and extended back to at least the Progressive Era) came about during World War II, when New Deal liberals made their peace with corporate America and embraced growth-oriented variant of Keynesian economics which emphasized economic growth over redistribution. For two interpretations of the fate of postwar liberalism which markedly differ from Brinkley’s assessment, see Landon R.Y. Storrs’ *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), in which Storrs emphasizes instead the chilling effect of McCarthyism and the narrowing of politically acceptable positions which followed in the early 1950s as having a significantly larger impact on the ideological trajectory of postwar liberalism and Judith Stein’s *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), which points to the disastrous international trade policy decisions made to sacrifice much of the nation’s manufacturing base in part to shore up America’s Cold War alliance as far more detrimental to the fate of the New Deal-Great Society project. For a thorough discussion of how economic “growth” became a cure-all for U.S. policymakers during the postwar era, see Robert M. Collins, *The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
nation’s political economy, now faced a world in which the need for such balance seemed far less compelling or necessary. Realizing that their window of political opportunity was swiftly closing, Reuther, Philip Murray, and other labor leaders struggled mightily to forge a tripartite pact between the federal government, labor, and corporate management, which would stabilize relations among the three and make it possible to create “the sort of democratic corporatism that came to characterize countries like Austria, Sweden, and Germany in the 1950s and 1960s.” This pact, which Reuther eagerly yearned for, did not materialize, in part because of divisions among trade unionists, and also because the administration of President Harry S. Truman offered lukewarm support at best to this effort, a reflection of the administration’s frustration with organized labor after a series of strikes shook the nation between 1945 and 1946.

Above all else, the strident opposition of corporate America prevented the institutionalization of an American form of democratic corporatism in the late 1940s. As Nelson Lichtenstein has observed,

The CIO had profoundly misjudged the tenor of the postwar business community. The progressive industrialists with whom the industrial union federation hoped to achieve an accord…were in fact a relative uninfluential minority. Key business spokesmen were the practical conservatives who presided over the core manufacturing firms in steel, chemical, electrical, auto, rubber, and transport industries…These industrialists had emerged from the war with enormous sophistication and self-confidence…They felt little need for the kind of state-sponsored labor-management collaboration that

78 Ibid., pg. 226. See also Kevin Boyle’s analysis of this period in his *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism 1945-1968* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pgs. 1-9, which, while partly agreeing with Lichtenstein’s analysis of Walter Reuther and the UAW in *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* also challenges it by positing that “Walter Reuther and his supporters…were not the harbingers of the postwar liberal order but rather the inheritors of the social democratic ideological and political formations Steve Fraser has so effectively traced for the 1930s and early 1940s. The UAW leadership did not abandon this social democratic agenda in the late 1940s. On the contrary, Reuther and the UAW leadership continued to promote democratic economic planning and an expanded welfare state throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They did so, moreover, at the highest levels of government.” (Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism*, 4). In Boyle’s interpretation, it is the continuing power of Southern Democrats and their ability to neuter or outright block progressive legislation sponsored by a UAW unhappily housed within the same umbrella of the Democratic Party which was largely responsible for the UAW’s valiant but ill-fated attempts to successfully advance a social democratic policy agenda. (Ibid., 5).

helped legitimize a mixed capitalist economy in Germany, France, and Italy in the immediate postwar era.\textsuperscript{80}

Flush with confidence and enjoying a near-miraculous rejuvenation in their fortunes not seen since before the onset of the Great Depression, most corporate leaders saw no reason to parley with Reuther, Murray, or any other labor leader. Instead, “executives of corporations at the core of American industry sought the restoration of the managerial prerogatives that wartime conditions had eroded in the areas of product pricing, market allocation, and shop-floor work environment.”\textsuperscript{81}

Consequently, “they were intensely suspicious of the kind of New Deal social engineering favored by labor, and only with some reluctance did they accommodate themselves to the modest degree of economic stimulation that would later go by the name “commercial Keynesianism.”\textsuperscript{82}

Instead, corporate leaders sought to “be free of government or union interference in determining the wage-price relationship in each industry.”\textsuperscript{83} Eager to avoid being in situation where a savvy labor union leader like Reuther would have a real say in setting the terms of the “wage-price relationship,” corporations like General Motors and the Ford Motor Company instead acceded to union demands for improved benefits and private pensions, provided that those pensions remained firmly under the control of corporate management. The pattern of postwar collective bargaining was thereby set: organized labor and corporate management would periodically do battle over private welfare benefits, an arena in which corporate leaders gradually realized could be turned to their advantage. As Joshua Freeman has written:

Private and public welfare benefits were intimately linked. The Auto Workers’ and Steelworkers’ drives for company pensions stemmed from the inadequacies of Social Security. Inflation had eaten away at the spending power of federal retirement payments, which in 1948 averaged only $25 a month, and nearly half the country’s workers

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 227-228.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 228.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
were not covered by the program at all. Business opposition had blocked repeated efforts to improve benefits by raising taxes. The CIO unions, by demanding that employers provide retirement benefits above and beyond Social Security payments, created an incentive for business to drop its opposition to improving the government system.84

The CIO’s overriding economic policy priority in the immediate postwar years was to support “extensive governmental action” in order to prevent economic stagnation.85 Realizing the increasingly high stakes in its fight with management over how best to provide economic security for older workers and retirees, organized labor recognized that Social Security would be insufficient to fulfill this purpose.86

As Harry Becker, the Director of the UAW-CIO’s Social Security Department observed in a December 1949 speech before the American Economic Association and Industrial Relations Research Association:

The retirement problem can be quite simply stated. We have an aging population with the proportion of old to young increasing; the expectations of living longer are increasing; and the cost of living longer is sharply upwards in trend...The economic impact of the problems is accentuated by the lack of an organized and universal program assuring financial security to the worker when he is no longer able to work whether the reason be primarily age or incapacity.87

The “lack of an organized and universal program” which Becker highlighted in his speech was

85 Zieger, The CIO, 314.
an obvious reference to the Social Security Act. As Becker continued,

When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935 there were hopes that public social insurance legislation was the solution to the problem. These hopes have not been realized. Those who framed and supported the Federal social security program had conceived of this legislation as the foundation for an integrated approach to provide economic security for those who had served industry and society.

Instead of serving as a permanent solution to the problem of old age economic insecurity, Social Security had, as Becker then suggested, contributed to its further irresolution. As he noted, Social Security’s Old Age Assistance program, which had been “conceived as a stop-gap and auxiliary program” had instead become “the basic approach to the problem,” and that “county and state poor relief” remained “the only universal provision for incapacity.”

After having painted Social Security and other old age assistance programs as fragmented, piecemeal, and ultimately inadequate, Becker then enunciated labor’s proposed solution, which would remain at the heart of its postwar political strategy for the next several decades. What labor wanted, in Becker’s words, was a

[t]wo-way drive for social security…a drive on the legislative front and a drive on the collective bargaining front. Labor’s position is that to the extent that adequate security for workers is not provided through governmental programs the problem of workers’ security will be taken to the collective bargaining table. Economic security for the worker when he is no longer able to work is as fundamental a concern of the Union as wages and working conditions.

As Becker fatefully observed, “security for union members only or for members of those Unions with sufficient economic strength to win their collective bargaining demands is not an adequate solution because the problem of insecurity is common to all segments of our society.” If organized

88 Ibid., 2.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 2-3.
91 Ibid., 3-4.
labor wanted to continue to speak credibly on behalf of all American workers – regardless of whether or not they were union members – then it had to continue to fight for “inclusive Federal legislation and good public administration” so that “all workers in America can be assured of an equitable retirement income based upon employment, whether it be in industry or in other economic pursuits. The basic retirement income program must provide protection for all workers in the economy. Protection must be more stable, continuous and broader in scope than can be achieved in private and isolated pension plans.”

While Becker painted an ominous picture in his remarks about the state of security for older workers approaching retirement, his conclusion, that “the purposes for which the [Social Security] legislation was enacted in 1935 have been in large measure negated for the millions of aged persons who are without any means of support when their pay checks stop,” was supported by the continuing discontent in California, where old-age pension advocates and opponents battled over that state’s pension plan, and by similar rumblings in Colorado. Corporate leaders like C.E. Wilson, the President of the General Motors Corporation, had also taken note of the increasing inadequacy of Social Security, and had at least publicly expressed some measure of support for strengthening the Social Security system.

Believing that labor and management had therefore reached a rare place of agreement and accord about the need to increase the economic support available to older and retired workers,

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92 Ibid., 4.
Becker outlined the UAW’s position on private pension plans. Namely, the UAW held that they should be “formulated and administered by a Board of Administration on which the Union and Management have equal representation and that this Board should have an impartial chairman selected from the general public.” But joint administration of private pension plans was a bridge too far for most corporate managers, who had traditionally viewed such plans as their sole prerogative and not open to negotiation or question. Unions like the UAW-CIO wanted joint administration not only to “assure democratic administration” of such plans, but also to ensure that there would be a “degree of employee participation and identification with the program that would not otherwise be possible.” For much the same reason, management wanted to ensure that unions would have no say whatsoever in the administration of private pension plans. In essence, management hoped to use such plans to inculcate the values of corporate management among its workforce, while unions wanted to use such plans as a way to make sure that workers would be sure to associate pensions as a hard-won right exacted by collective bargaining rather than a generous and benevolent gift on the part of management.

Ultimately, though, the UAW hoped that the need for private pension plans which Becker repeatedly referred to as “supplementary,” would be rendered largely obsolete by improvements to Social Security. “As public programs are strengthened during the next few years the pressure for

92 As Becker stated in his remarks, “present negotiations for workers’ security programs establish a new and significant area for labor-management cooperation through collective bargaining and in the joint administration of the programs. These programs are the evidence of maturity and increased social responsibility of both unions and management.” (Ibid., 13).
93 Ibid., 7.
94 Ibid., 8.
supplementation through collective bargaining will be lessened.”99 The CIO-UAW’s embrace of private pensions was therefore guided by the hope that they would be a short-term, stop-gap fix and not a long-term, permanent solution to the problem of economic insecurity in old age. Ironically, then, while organized labor had been lukewarm and somewhat distant in its relationship to Social Security when it had first been enacted in 1935, it had now come to embrace the program in a much more wholehearted way.

Failing to Revive the New Deal

As organized labor and corporate management struggled to define the terms of economic security during the early postwar years, liberals within the Democratic Party hoped the return of peace would revive the New Deal’s reformist impulse.100 As they soon found out, reviving the New Deal was easier said than done. Consequently, the fight over the New Deal’s incomplete legacy took place on many different fronts during the immediate postwar years, with the battle over national health insurance occupying perhaps the most bitterly fought-over ground. That conflict, which erupted between the Truman administration and the American Medical Association during the late 1940s, would inadvertently contribute to the rise of the senior state. The calamitous political defeat that liberals eventually suffered would prod them into an embrace of a more limited version of the

100 There is a large and extensive debate surrounding the extent to which liberals remained committed to the reformist impulses which had characterized much of the New Deal’s frenetic energy and time during the 1930s. The key work is Alan Brinkley’s The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War, which posits that New Deal liberalism underwent an ideological evolution during the late 1930s and into the 1940s. That evolution eventually produced an American liberalism which had achieved rapprochement with corporate power at the cost of shedding the long-standing concerns of liberals about the dangers of concentrated economic power. (For an exploration of similar themes, see also Ellis Hawley’s The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly, New York: Fordham University Press, rev. ed., 1995). In recent years, Brinkley’s arguments have been more openly challenged by newer scholarship which offers a differing interpretation of the fate of postwar New Deal liberalism. Jonathan Bell’s The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and more recently Landon Storrs’ The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), both offer more optimistic interpretations of New Deal liberalism during the early postwar period, at least until the advent of the Cold War led to the muting and outright suppression of more left-wing voices in American politics and society.
welfare state than they had originally hoped for, with the thin consolation that perhaps one day it might serve as the foundation for a more expansive one.

In 1945 and 1946, though, it was not yet clear how the fight over national health insurance would turn out. Liberals in the Democratic Party and elsewhere believed the cause of national health insurance was self-evident – provided the public was properly educated about the benefits that would accrue from national health insurance. Leading the charge for national health insurance was the Federal Security Agency within the Truman administration. However, the Truman administration’s seemingly halfhearted commitment to the legacy of the New Deal gradually became a source of frustration for many liberals, who became increasingly concerned that the impasse at the federal level over social and economic policy was amplifying problems at the local and state level. In a December 1947 column in the *New York Times*, John J. Corson, the Director of the Old Age and Survivors Insurance Bureau of the Social Security Board and one of the architects of the original Social Security Act, observed that one in three people over the age of 65 was receiving public aid, and that this figure was expected to continue growing, despite the return of sustained economic prosperity in the late 1940s. Corson argued that it was the responsibility of the “government…[to] guarantee each family a *minimum* of well-being,” which he defined as meaning “every man, woman or child who can’t work and is without wages be assured a definite, minimum cash income; and second, that every family, without regard to its ability to pay…be assured medical care and decent housing,” instead of allowing fragmented and duplicative public assistance programs in states and local communities to continue growing at an unchecked rate.

101 John J. Corson, “To Achieve Freedom From Want,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1947. The proportion of elderly people dependent upon public assistance remained remarkably stable throughout the 1940s. In 1946, roughly 33% of persons aged 65 or over received some form of public aid. That percentage was essentially the same as it had been five years earlier in 1941. See Newman M. Biller, “New Patterns of Life for the Aged: Employment for older people who are able; care for those no longer capable of work,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1946. See also fn. 56 and fn. 57 above.

102 Ibid. Italics in original.
Corson’s public plea for a revival at the federal level of New Deal-style economic security measures signaled to the Truman administration that it needed to shore up its liberal flank before the upcoming presidential election. The administration thus began making efforts to woo disaffected New Deal liberals back into the fold during the winter and spring of 1948 with broad public gestures designed to demonstrate that it had not forgotten the New Deal’s unfinished work.  

Specifically, in May 1948, President Truman recommended a comprehensive expansion of Social Security that advocated adding 20,000,000 workers under the program’s umbrella, a measure that was highly symbolic, at best, given the fact that the Republican-controlled Congress was unlikely to embrace any such measure. Alongside its muscular embrace of Social Security, the Truman administration had already begun to publically espouse the cause of national health insurance with a vigor that surprised many liberals.

The administration’s new tack had begun in the fall of 1947, when President Truman had asked Oscar R. Ewing, a corporate lawyer and longtime Democratic Party official in New York State, to serve as the Administrator of the Federal Security Agency (FSA). While Ewing lacked any formal training or experience in the practice of medicine, he did bring an evangelical fervor and a lawyerly tenacity to his new position, which helped to reestablish the administration’s bona fides with disaffected liberals. Late in January 1948, Truman publicly charged Ewing with the task of “undertak[ing] a comprehensive study of the possibilities for raising health levels,” an innocuous-

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104 Oscar R. Ewing to Harry S. Truman, August 21, 1947, Harry S. Truman File, Alpha. Corresp. File 1947-1950, Strickland, Sons and George, Ltd – Wa-Wee, Papers of Oscar R. Ewing, Box 26, Harry S. Truman Library (hereafter “HSTL”). In Alonzo Hamby’s words, “Ewing’s advocacy of comprehensive social welfare legislation – a popular magazine described him as “Mr. Welfare State himself” – was the end result of a tradition that had begun with the social workers of the Progressive Era, had found partial realization during the New Deal, and was now struggling for complete fulfillment. Ewing also represented a type of Democrat who had developed during the New Deal – the staunch, partisan regular who was nevertheless committed to social welfare liberalism and identified his party with it.” See Alonzo L. Hamby, “The Vital Center, the Fair Deal, and the Quest for a Liberal Political Economy,” The American Historical Review 77, no. 3 (June, 1972): 653-678. The Federal Security Agency was a direct institutional predecessor of the present-day Departments of Education and Health and Human Services.
sounding command that would have tremendous political ramifications for the administration. Ewing dutifully carried out the President’s request, and presented his final report “The Nation's Health: a Ten Year Program,” in early September 1948 to the President. Ewing had worked hard to build a broad base of support in the nation’s medical and health community for the administration’s program, and had managed to garner the begrudging participation of the American Medical Association (A.M.A.), the main lobbying organization and professional membership society for the nation’s doctors.

Figure 4. Oscar R. Ewing (center) is sworn as Administrator of the Federal Security Agency, August 27, 1947.
Photo courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library.

The A.M.A.’s participation in the administration’s study of the nation’s health needs, though, had not lessened its opposition to the administration’s desire for a new national health insurance system, potentially along the lines of the recently enacted National Health Service in the United Kingdom. Ewing, characteristically, refused to back down from his pursuit of this goal. Speaking before the American Medical Association’s House of Delegates meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, he made the case for national health insurance. At the same time, he extended an olive branch to the assembled physicians by expressing his hope that the Federal Security Agency and the A.M.A. might yet find common ground on other issues, such as support for “more and better medical education, for more hospitals, for local diagnostic clinics, for local health officers.”

Ewing’s attempts to conciliate the AMA fell mainly on deaf ears, as he later bitterly recalled:

[t]he American Medical Association wanted to be the exclusive sovereign of medicine. They didn't want the Government to have a thing to do with medicine. … They raised the awful specter of Government control. As a matter of fact, Government didn't want control, I know, because I was in the driver's seat at that time.

Though the Truman administration would, in conjunction with Congress, later enact legislation providing for greatly increased medical research, such laws were merely a consolation prize when considered against the goal of national health insurance. Ewing would labor valiantly over the course of 1948 to generate support from a motley coalition of private voluntary organizations willing to support the Truman administration’s domestic policy programs, but more often than not such efforts yielded limited results.

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109 See, for example, Ewing’s address to the National Social Welfare Assembly on January 27, 1948 (three weeks after his address to the AMA in Cleveland) in which he floated “A Charter of Human Resources” that would “assure every American…the right to Health, the right to Education, the right to Security, [and] the right to Recreation,” echoing
Shifting from Health Insurance for All to Health Insurance for Some

Ultimately, Ewing and the administration’s efforts to secure the enactment of national health insurance would not be entirely in vain. After the President’s proposed national health insurance plan had been defeated in Congress in 1949, liberals like Ewing and Wilbur Cohen began to examine ways of gradually securing enactment of national health insurance, albeit in a gradual and incremental fashion.\(^{110}\) One promising area in which Ewing and his colleagues began to focus on was the issue of health care solely for older Americans. As John Thurston, a senior aide to Ewing later recalled, the administration’s study of the nation’s health needs throughout 1948 “brought into relief many problems related to our aging population. As a result, Mr. Ewing asked me to establish an [a]gency committee to review the situation and to report to him on how adequately existing programs were meeting the need of older people.”\(^{111}\) As Thurston related, this informal committee helped lay the groundwork for the Truman administration’s National Conference on Aging held in the summer of 1950.

By focusing on the health needs of the elderly, Ewing and his colleagues hoped to enact a partially universal national health insurance that would include only the elderly, but which could serve as an experimental model of sorts to demonstrate the virtues of a national, universal health


insurance system encompassing all Americans. That assumption, of course, rested on the success of the initial program aimed at older Americans. Assuming such success, Ewing hoped that future administrations would be able to build on it and expand it over time, and that universal national health insurance would be achieved in a slow but sustained manner, much as Social Security had gradually been expanded to include more classes of workers, as well as more groups that previously had been excluded.

Ewing and the Truman administration’s shift to prioritizing the health care of elderly people may have also benefitted from the popular discontent among older Americans that had begun to emerge once more during the late 1940s. In late May 1948, the New York Times reported that Dr. Francis Townsend had resumed speaking tours throughout the country. Backed by the support of a numerically diminished base of supporters, Townsend’s tours hinted that the underlying conditions of economic insecurity among older people in the Great Depression that had fueled the growth of the Townsend Movement during the 1930s had begun to reassert themselves. The continuing viability of the Movement owed much to the continuing inadequacy of the Social Security system. As the New York Times observed in late 1948, after President Truman’s upset victory in that year’s presidential race,

Congress had been urged repeatedly to broaden and change the Federal Social Security program. During the presidential campaign just ended leaders of both political parties added their voices to this plea. And there can be no doubting the need. A good many aging people in this country face the dismaying fact that the Social Security system cannot keep the wolf from their doors.¹¹²

The net result of congressional inaction, though, was to effectively shift the problem of managing economic insecurity among older people shifted back to the states and localities, many of which

lacked either adequate resources or infrastructure to actually accomplish the goal of controlling the spread of elderly poverty.

Despite lacking adequate resources, the desire of some state and local politicians to garner votes had led them to once more embrace the cause of state-financed pensions for older people. In December 1948, at the annual meeting of the Americana Public Welfare Association (A.P.W.A.), the major professional gathering of leading public welfare administrators in the United States, APWA Director Howard L. Russell expressed alarm that an increasing number of states had instituted pension plans for persons over the age of 65 with loose eligibility requirements. As Russell publicly fretted, “we believe the aged should receive adequate help, but the whole picture of welfare services must be considered…[s]tates with pension programs use up so much of their welfare resources for the aged that they bankrupt themselves where other welfare services…are concerned.” Russell’s alarm was echoed by J. Douglas Brown, a Princeton economist and one of the architects of the original Social Security Act, who warned in April 1949 that “unless contributory social insurance is strengthened and enlarged now, it may be displaced ‘by its more demanding step-sisters, assistance and relief.’”

Russell’s and Brown’s concerns did not go unheeded by Ewing and other liberals in the Truman administration. In their eyes, the surprise election results in November 1948 that returned Harry Truman to the White House seemed to be nothing less than an ex post facto vindication of the embattled administration’s domestic policy agenda. Flush with victory in the months following

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115 See, for example, Ewing’s address to the Women’s City Club of Boston on December 7th, 1948, in which he claimed that in light of the previous month’s election results that “I think…we know pretty well now what the people of this country want…I think you will all recognize that the majority of the plain people of this country stand squarely behind the great program of social legislation that President Truman has advocated. And that, to a very large extent, these people voted for him because they trusted him sincerely and vigorously to carry out and expand this program.”
Truman’s victory, Ewing took to the stump to campaign on behalf of the newly reinvigorated administration. The time had finally come, in Ewing’s mind, for the resumption of the reforms promised or even tentatively outlined in the New Deal’s waning days. Moreover, by enacting these reforms, the United States would be able to demonstrate its commitment to the sort of broad, sweeping rethinking of the social compact that had become *de rigueur* in much of war-torn Western Europe. On June 20, 1949, Ewing spoke before the New York Public Welfare Association to rally its support for the administration’s proposed improvements to the Social Security system. Though Ewing repeatedly emphasized the cooperative nature of federal social welfare efforts, his words appear to have had little effect in generating favorable press coverage or swaying public opinion in favor of the administration’s proposals.

Instead, by late 1949, public opinion on the issue of old-age pensions was approaching a degree of volatility not seen since the halcyon days of the Townsend Movement fifteen years earlier. The *New York Times*’s coverage of the labor-management strife in the steel and automobile manufacturing industries and the fights over old-age pensions in California and Colorado, contributed to an increasingly feverish atmosphere. As John J. Corson, one of the original

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Oscar R. Ewing, Speech – Women’s City Club, Boston, Massachusetts, December 7th, 1948 folder, in the Box 41, the Papers of Oscar R. Ewing, Federal Security Agency, Speeches and Articles – 1950, HSTL.


See Tony Judt, *Postwar: Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2006), for a further treatment of this subject. Ewing in essence wanted to rekindle the sort of “Atlantic crossing” which had marked American reform before World War II, and his commitment to a transnational variety of social reform was demonstrated by his and other FSA staff member visits to Western Europe (particularly Great Britain) during the late 1940s in order to learn more about the new social welfare systems then being designed and implemented in that region. See Rodgers’ discussion of the New Deal in *Atlantic Crossings*, 415-417.


119 See, for example, Seymour E. Harris’s article “What to Do With 18 Million Aged?” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1949, which argued that “Social Security may make a contribution but so far the Government’s insurance program has been niggardly and unresponsive…surely a sensible approach is a Social Security program for the aged which will eventually cost $20 billion, with (say) two-thirds to be paid by the workers or their employers and one-third by the general taxpayer…this is the way to counter the semi-crank movements – the Townsend Plan and the extreme Rankin
architects of the Social Security Act observed in the pages of the *Times*, “Americans must appear pension mad to the world at large,” partly because “existing [pension] arrangements are not satisfactory…the problem of the aged is relentlessly growing.”

In order to solve this “relentlessly growing” problem of economic insecurity (and by extension, increasing dependency) on the part of older Americans, Corson could only offer cold comfort to political liberals. Arguing that “there is little evidence that Congress proposes to adopt a rational system of public old-age security that will fit the needs of the aged as well as the bounds of our economy,” Corson argued, instead, for a piecemeal expansion of Social Security, in the hope that doing so might prevent state governments from “forego[ing] the temptation to make political capital of assistance for the needy aged,” a temptation which Corson suspected state officials, in order to secure votes from grateful older voters, had given into. Corson cautioned *Times* readers that “this prescription must be taken promptly if we are to meet rationally, and without tempting national bankruptcy, the unavoidable problem of old-age dependency.” If it was not, Corson warned, pro-pension organized groups would eventually “force through a pension for everyone at 65…with staggering costs to the national economy or the stronger unions will win relatively high pensions for a favored group of employees, and more money will be poured into the relief method of caring for the aged.”

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121 Ibid. As the *New York Times* reported in October 1949, “in Louisiana no less than four out of five persons of 65 years of age or more are receiving old-age assistance – a sudden doubling of the number since June 1948.” Furthermore, the *Times* added that “in Oklahoma and Georgia more than half, and in Texas, Colorado, Alabama, and Mississippi nearly half of all persons 65 years of age or over are drawing old-age assistance, but in New York and New Jersey the proportion is only one out of ten.” See Sumner H. Slichter, “The Pressing Problem of Old-Age Security,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 1949.

122 Ibid.
Corson’s warnings were not merely idle or solitary threats. In subsequent issues of the *Times*, other social welfare experts chimed in, echoing his concerns. New York City Welfare Commissioner Raymond M. Hilliard argued that existing Social Security benefits were “preposterously insufficient,” and that “this country might not be facing strikes in the steel and other industries if adequate social security benefits had been put into effect.” At its annual conference that year, the Western Governor’s Conference went on record “in favor of ‘broad extension’ of Social Security and liberalization of benefits under a contributory plan” and declared “such a program to be ‘much preferable’ to the present old age assistance afforded only after persons become destitute,” a remarkable feat, given that the delegation of twelve state governors at the conference was neatly and evenly split between the two major political parties.

A few months after Corson’s column appeared in the *Times*, California’s voters, in yet another round of that state’s seemingly endless war over old-age pensions, cut back much of the state’s existing old-age pension rolls by increasing eligibility requirements needed to qualify for public assistance. While the November 1949 electoral results in California undoubtedly reassured anxious elected public officials in that state and elsewhere, a deep and growing sense of unease persisted in the business community, which remained deeply divided on the merits of public-provided old-age pensions.

From his perch as Treasurer and Director at the Eastman Kodak Company, Marion B. Folsom, a stalwart member of the Republican Party’s eastern wing and one of the drafters of the

123 “Hilliard Asks Rise in Social Security,” *The New York Times*, September 27, 1949. See also “The Necessity for Private Welfare Aid,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1949, in which Hilliard and Robert T. Lansdale, the New York State Commissioner of Social Welfare, publicly pleaded that “the urgent task of meeting the health and welfare needs of the community cannot be performed by the public welfare agencies alone. It requires the assistance of all members of the community…we need private as well as public welfare programs to take care of our most pressing burden – human need and distress. We cannot afford to have less private welfare. We need more of it. We need more of it than ever before.” (Ibid.)
original Social Security Act, began to sound the alarm over what he perceived as the rising threat of fiscally unsustainable state pensions. At a late November 1949 meeting of the National Industrial Conference Board, Folsom argued that

unless steps are taken very soon to strengthen the contributory insurance plan, the country faces the grave danger of losing this plan by default and adopting the charity approach entirely. The aim should be to extend the insurance program as soon as possible to all those gainfully employed and then to shift the Old Age Assistance entirely to the states for those who cannot be covered adequately under the insurance program.\(^{126}\)

In essence, Folsom was trying to make the case to his fellow corporate executives that it was in their self-interest to support expanding Social Security. In his concluding remarks to the assembled conference attendees, Folsom pointedly stated that

businessmen now have a great opportunity to assist in solving the problem of providing economic protection for the aged…they should first support early Congressional action to extend the coverage of the contributory Old Age Insurance Plan to most of those gainfully employed and to bring the benefits more in line with present living costs. Secondly, companies without pension plans should study their particular situation to determine if a supplementary plan is necessary to provide adequate protection for the worker who has spent his lifetime in industry.\(^{127}\)

If businessmen undertook these two tasks, Folsom assured them “these plans, both government and private, if kept on a reasonable basis should not be considered as conflicting with the private enterprise system. On the other hand, they should prove to be strong adjuncts to it.”\(^{128}\)

Folsom’s viewpoint was not particularly popular in the business community. In contrast to Folsom’s argument for an enlightened corporate liberalism, the historically anti-union National


\(^{127}\) Ibid.

\(^{128}\) Ibid.
Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.) vigorously denounced the promotion of the “welfare state” and “statism” on the part of the Truman administration a few weeks later at an annual meeting.\(^{129}\) Seemingly against Folsom’s enunciation of the need for corporate leadership in the realm of social welfare, the assembled speakers at the N.A.M. meeting instead “charged that business, big and small, had failed to make its case understandable or convincing, either nationally or among its own neighbors and friends.”\(^{130}\) As Lee H. Bristol, president of the Bristol-Myers Company, stated in his remarks, “communications is a two-way street and we’ve got to see that we are effective from our end of it,” and urged that management instead do more to communicate to its employees, lest they “follow the false gods and carry all of us to the precipice.”\(^{131}\)

The mood at the N.A.M. meeting was that one of combativeness rather than cooperation, with most of the assembled business leaders more inclined to do battle with organized labor. N.A.M.’s attitude on the question of expanding public assistance of any sort – whether through the Social Security system or otherwise - was part and parcel of the larger struggle over public and private pensions that roiled the politics of the late 1940s and into the early 1950s. Despite the hopes and original intentions of the architects of the 1935 Social Security Act, the law’s old age assistance program rather than its old age insurance program had become increasingly ensconced as a permanent feature of the nation’s public welfare system. The limited breadth of old age insurance’s eligible worker categories and the meager benefits that it offered meant that much of the burden of supporting retired workers fell chiefly upon either private industry, old age assistance, or western states like California, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Oregon in which old-age advocacy groups had been

\(^{129}\) “Statism Is Called Peril to Business,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 1949. N.A.M.’s concerns were similar to those made by Senator Robert A. Taft (R-OH), who had expressed his concern that “the country was drifting into a problem of providing $100 a month through Government or business for all persons over 65 years of age.” See “Taft Sees Pensions As Huge Problem,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1949.

\(^{130}\) Ibid.

\(^{131}\) Ibid. Bristol did not clarify to what precipice he meant elsewhere in his remarks.
able to successfully utilize popular referendums to enact statewide old age pension systems.\textsuperscript{132} Howard L. Russell, the director of the American Public Welfare Association, charged that these groups represented “a very serious threat to good public welfare administration.”\textsuperscript{133} California’s enacted old-age pension stood at $75 per month in 1949 for all residents over the age of 63, which led to fears that older people would move to the state in order to take advantage of its relative generosity.\textsuperscript{134}

Unlike New York’s old age pension system, with its more stringent requirements, California’s pension made no stipulation that family members of pension recipients were obliged to provide support as well, and it included a modest prior residency requirement of only five years, rather than ten or fifteen.\textsuperscript{135} As a result, the cost of old age pensions in California had risen to 17% of the state’s overall billion-dollar budget, and was projected to continue rising, sparking fears that the pension system might eventually bankrupt the state.\textsuperscript{136} Likewise, in Washington State, Governor Arthur B. Langlie publicly warned that “the state may face bankruptcy unless welfare aid is reduced drastically,” with publicly-supported pensions accounting for 43% of Washington’s state budget in


\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
Unsurprisingly, in November 1949 a conference of western governors had urged a “broad extension” of Social Security and “liberalization of benefits under a contributory plan” in the hope of shifting the costs of old-age economic security off of their ledgers and to the federal government and workers contributing into Social Security’s national old-age insurance program.138

**Strengthening Social Security?**

The developing national crisis around old age economic insecurity had, by the end of 1949, led to an emergent recognition among Federal and state officials that Social Security’s old age insurance system needed to be greatly augmented.139 As the *New York Times* reported in December 1949, approximately 1 in 4 people over the age of 65 was receiving public assistance of some sort, and the cost of supporting them stood at roughly nine times what it had been in 1936, the last year before the enactment of Social Security.140 Signs of alarm were not limited to federal and state policymakers. The commercial insurance industry, for example, which had long been in the vanguard against Social Security, had come to begrudgingly embrace Social Security’s old age insurance system, in part because its actuarial calculations had unsurprisingly revealed that neither the federal nor the state governments would be able to adequately shoulder the burden of old age dependency if the number of older people in need of assistance continued to rise at an exponential rate.141 The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, recognizing that unions would continue to push for pension plans so long as Social Security remained inadequate, suddenly found religion on the

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subject and began to dampen (though not entirely withdraw) its criticism of the program as one more step on the slippery slope towards socialism.\textsuperscript{142}

Likewise, nine months after its fiery 1949 annual meeting, the N.A.M. had taken stock of the generous contracts which the UAW and the USWA had won from the Ford Motor and Bethlehem Steel companies. As an internal N.A.M. report observed, “1949 saw pension proposals assume the status of major demands as some unions exerted industry-wide or nation-wide power and sought to impose a standardized benefit plan package on various industries.”\textsuperscript{143} Consequently, the N.A.M. recommended that its member companies make a “full exploration” as to whether or not they should adopt a private pension plan; in N.A.M.’s words, “although the many legal complexities surrounding compulsory bargaining on pensions seem to impose stumbling blocks in the way of employee initiation of plans, the several advantages which can accrue as the result of the establishment of a sound program may outweigh these difficulties.”\textsuperscript{144}

In other words, N.A.M. was advising its members that it was in their best interest to develop a private pension program or else run the risk of having one thrust upon them during collective bargaining agreements that might give far too much power to labor unions.\textsuperscript{145} By linking such plans


\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{145} See Ibid., 17-18, in which N.A.M. observed that “most employers who have had some experience with pensions feel that the time to consider whether or not a pension is feasible or practicable for a company is well before the union raises the question…The advantages of establishing a company-initiated pension program are held to be… “the employer gets the credit for his demonstrated interest in his employees welfare…a sound and thoughtful approach by the employer may release much of the union pressure upon employees – the presence of a program adapted to the capacity of the
with Social Security, corporate managers could avoid having to carry the entire cost of a noncontributory pension program and possibly generate and earn employee loyalty by offering such plans as a preemptive tactical move in the ongoing battle with organized labor. As N.A.M. described it, private pension plans should “be constructed so as not to place an undue burden on the company during years of poor earnings but at the same time provide for employees as they retire in a fashion that, when added to social security, will give adequate retirement income.” In N.A.M.’s telling, private pensions were neither paternalistic nor necessarily reflective of an enlarged sense of social responsibility on the part of management; rather, they were a tool or a device which, if used properly, could help to wean workers away from the clarion call of union solidarity. Hinting at the continuing communications benefits a private pension plan could offer, N.A.M. observed that “during the years of employees’ participation in the plan, there is considerable necessity for re-selling it because the details become vague as employees are unaware of the continuing cost to the company and because such benefits sometimes are taken for granted.”

While N.A.M. and its constituent members debated how best to approach the dual issues of private pensions and the question of whether or not to support expanding Social Security, Ewing and his allies within the Truman administration found themselves grasping for a new way to approach the issue of national health insurance. After the highly publicized defeat of the Truman administration in the fight over national health insurance at the hands of the American Medical company and the needs of the employees can be a strong antidote to unreasonable union demands.” (Underlining in original).

146 Ibid., 12. In N.A.M.’s words, “one of the unfortunate aspects of labor’s drive for ‘security’ benefits is that many unions have implied that they care more for the welfare of employees than does their employer. It is particularly easy for a union to promote this attitude when the union administers the fund and determines how it is to be invested. By abdicating responsibility through contributions to welfare and pension funds over which they have no control, employers lose much of the human relations values obtainable and continue to bear the responsibility for plan failures...Full management or trustee control over pension and welfare funds is a most desirable objective – to assure sound administration, to demonstrate management’s concern and assumption of responsibility and to assure that fund contributions and benefits are not considered as current wages but are being accumulated for specific future purposes” (Ibid., 15).

147 Ibid., 12.

148 Ibid., 33.
Association in 1949, Oscar Ewing and other senior level administrators decided to try a different method to build public support for national health insurance. On June 7 1950, with President Truman’s blessing, Ewing announced that the Federal Security Agency was inviting experts on aging to convene in Washington in two months’ time in order to explore “the various problems incident to our increasingly older population.”

Ewing’s colleague Clark Tibbitts, to whom Ewing largely delegated the administration of the conference, thereafter traveled to various universities in order to drum up further interest in the academic community for the federal government’s efforts, while Ewing reached out to the administration’s organized labor allies. Tibbitts, a pioneer in the field of gerontological research at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Human Research, where he and his colleague Wilma Donahue had planned and executed pioneering studies of Washtenaw County, Michigan’s older population that had begun to supply badly-needed economic and social information to local and state officials in Michigan. In addition to his connection to the University of Michigan, Tibbitts had

149 Perhaps still smarting from its wounds, the Truman-backed National Conference on Aging skated around the issue of medical care, and ultimately recommended that “the hospital needs for the aged should be met by expansion of general hospitals to include units specifically designed to meet the needs of older patients and that no special hospitals should be constructed for the aged,” a position in line with the Truman administration’s support for the Hill-Burton Act, which authorized millions of dollars in federal spending on hospital construction from the 1940s through the 1960s. See U.S. Federal Security Agency, National Conference on Aging, “Digest of Proceedings, Section IV, Health Maintenance and Rehabilitation,” August 13-15, 1950, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available at: California and West Coast Labor and Industrial Relations, selected publications, IRLE-LB01. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library, University of California, Berkeley. Accessed via the Online Archive of California at http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6pf/dsc/#c01-1.3.9.5 (Accessed September 15, 2016).


been a student of the famed sociologist Ernest W. Burgess at the University of Chicago, and had extensive contacts within the growing community of academic gerontologists, social welfare experts, and elected or appointed public officials who were interested in taking a more active approach to the needs of older people.

Ewing and Tibbitts recognized that while the Social Security’s old age and survivors’ insurance provision was designed to address economic security for older Americans, its limited size and benefits meant the public assistance rolls would continue to rise with the rising population of older Americans. A fiscal crisis thereby loomed on the horizon for both the federal and state governments if measures were not taken to halt and reverse the growing financial dependency of older people on federal and state grants-in-aid under the Social Security system. In a June 1950 speech to the United Textile Workers of America Convention, Ewing made the case for the necessity of the aging conference, observing that

I do not think any of us are so limited in our thinking that we would be ready to assume that Social Security benefits could possibly solve all the problems arising from the aging of our population…The dream of every man and woman is to be able to live a full and happy life, and to grow old gracefully, with security, contentment, and dignity. 

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152 In his speech at Marshall College, Tibbitts explicitly connected the conference on aging to the Social Security Act, noting that the Act’s Old Age and Survivors Insurance program “has several deficiencies” such as “exclud[ing] millions of workers,” providing “retirement benefits [that] are much too small,” which had thereby resulted in “heighten[ing] the demands for public assistance programs, with expensive effects in some states, notably California and Colorado” and “the current expansion of private pension systems, most spectacularly in the steel, coal, and automobile industries” which were already proving to be less “an ideal solution to the retirement income problem.” As Tibbitts continued, “national policy during the 1930s was to retire older workers in an effort to take care of the apparent surplus of manpower. I think you all know that the wisdom of this policy is now being seriously questioned” because “we now know that gainful employment is the principal means of meeting the need of older people to be wanted and to feel useful.” See Clark Tibbitts, Ibid., 9-10. Tibbitts, speaking on behalf of Ewing (and by extension the Truman administration), thereby connected the administration’s efforts to its illustrious predecessor, but also revealed the drastic change in assumptions among reform-minded liberals about how the federal government should best address the issue of economic security in old age.

As both Ewing and Tibbitts realized, the issue of expanding federal protection for older Americans had to be handled gently, for fear that too swift government action might provoke cries of encouraging older Americans to become overly dependent on the federal welfare state. Instead, Ewing and the Federal Security Agency stressed the conference’s necessity based on demographic changes such as the large-scale shift from a rural to a more urban population, and the extended life span of older Americans. By emphasizing these factors, Ewing hoped to position the conference as apolitical as possible, despite the obvious fact that its hoped-for recommendations would generate proposals for governmental action at the local, state, and federal levels.

In August 1950, the first ever National Conference on Aging convened in Washington, D.C. In his well-publicized opening message to the conference attendees decrying the evils of arbitrary age limits on retirement, President Truman expressed his hope that the conference would produce recommendations for his and future administrations to act on in order to combat the creeping increase in poverty among older Americans. Truman emphasized the dangers of forcing

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154 Clark Tibbitts, Address before the University of Michigan’s Third Annual Institute on Living in the Later Years conference, June 29, 1950 in Speech – Institute on Living in the Later Years, Ann Arbor, Michigan, June 29, 1950 folder, in Federal Security Agency, Speeches and Articles – 1950, Box 41, Papers of Oscar R. Ewing, HSTL.

155 Program for an Aging Population: A Progress Report to the Federal Security Administrator by the Working Committee on the Aging, March 17, 1950, Federal Security Agency, in Federal Security Agency, Speeches and Articles – 1950, Box 41, Papers of Oscar R. Ewing, HSTL. As this progress report observed, there was a need for “national policy [to be] directed toward the provision of employment for older people who wish to work and who have the capacity for it.” (Ibid. 9). While not quite as far-reaching as the original full employment legislation which had failed to make it through Congress unscathed five years earlier, the Federal Security Agency’s emphasis on securing employment for older workers remained remarkable nonetheless. There were limits to this willingness to use government power, though. As the progress report further noted, “women represent a special problem because most of them have gaps in their employment history during the child-rearing period. They find difficulty in re-entering employment...Imaginative communities may find ways of using these women to provide housekeeping, nursing, and other services” (Ibid., 11).


157 The initial idea for the conference had come from Ewing himself, who had written to the President’s secretary in January 1950 to see if the President would support the conference. Truman somewhat belatedly acquiesced to the conference in early June 1950. See Harry S. Truman to Oscar R. Ewing, June 6, 1950, in “White House Conference on Older Americans; National Conference on Aging” file, OF 2604, Box 1880, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Official File, White House Central Files, HSTL.
skilled workers out of employment “at a time like the present when we need increasing production to insure our national security.”158 In his letter to the conference attendees, he asserted that

Arbitrary age limits deprive us of some of our best workers…I would like to emphasize that the work of this Conference is of great significance to the strengthening of our democratic way of life. Our country is committed to the proposition that there should be opportunities for every citizen in it to use his abilities to the utmost as a member of his community. As we increase the opportunities for our older citizens to stand on their own feet, and live out their lives in self-respect, free from fear and want, we shall be helping to fulfill the promise of our free society.159

While the President’s message to the conference did receive significant and largely favorable newspaper coverage, neither it nor the conference itself succeeded in moving the dial of public opinion in any meaningful way.160

In part, this negligible effect may have reflected the ambivalence and indecision on display at the conference itself. While the various panels agreed that there were many problems facing older Americans, the delegates seemed conflicted as to how the government could best help older people in declining neighborhoods and communities scattered across the nation. Was it best for the federal government to improve the eligibility and benefits available to retirees under the Social Security system, an approach the President seemed to strongly support, even as it ran the risk of arousing the still virulent critics of the administration who claimed it would undermine American individual self-reliance, a claim that the administration had never properly addressed or rebutted? Or was it best to encourage private employers to retain older workers rather than compel them to retire at age 65 (or some other age), thereby provoking the attention of the N.A.M. or other like-minded business organizations, which would likely oppose any intervention by the administration in the affairs of

159 Harry S. Truman to Oscar Ewing, August 12, 1950, in 1950 August 11, President’s letter to Conference on Aging file, Papers of George M. Elsey, Harry S. Truman Administration, Speech File (June 5 – August 30, 1950), Box 45, HSTL.
160 Ibid. See also “Hope for the Aged,” The Washington Post, August 17, 1950.
private companies as symptomatic of an out-of-control federal government slouching towards socialism? No good answers were apparent, nor did any appear on the horizon.

The conference’s limited objectives also seemed to be designed to avoid controversy, and tended toward the banal, such as the need “to stimulate the exchange of ideas among persons of varied experience, with a view to solving problems of the Aging through voluntary and public organizations in each State, city, and community” and promotion of research on the problems of older people “in fields [such] as employment, health, education, recreation, rehabilitation and social and psychological adjustment.”

Assuming an almost defensive tone, Ewing assured the conference attendees on opening day that “the Federal Government has merely undertaken to provide the services and machinery for this conference…the thinking, the discussions, and the conclusions of the next three days will be the product, not of government, but if private citizens who have gathered here as experts and authorities in their personal and professional capacities.”

Qualifiers aside, Ewing ensured that the conference would be as open to the press as possible in order to generate interest in the proceedings. The press responded with half-hearted concern; the war in Korea, not surprisingly, provided much more compelling copy for newspapers in the late summer of 1950.

The Aftermath of the 1950 Conference

Despite being largely drowned out by the press coverage of events in Korea, the conference’s official findings would have growing importance in the years to come for local, state, and federal officials as they wrestled with the issue of old age economic insecurity. The various

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working groups assembled under the conference’s aegis marshalled some arresting statistics that suggested just how much mass suburbanization was beginning to alter the structure of many American families. Increasingly, the conference found, many older Americans lived in “smaller families” largely consisting of aging couples separated from their children and grandchildren. Of course, there were plenty of widows, widowers, and unmarried elderly people. Attendees repeatedly – and incorrectly as it turned out – argued that the American population would likely fall in the future due to a declining birth rate. Statistics later provided by the 1950 Census would reveal a dramatically different portrait of America’s changing demography, courtesy of the postwar Baby Boom.

The emphasis on a shrinking population added a sense of urgency to the conference’s final report. Many of the attendees seemed inclined to believe that the nation’s overall population would stagnate whilst its elderly population would continue to increase at a disproportionately high rate, courtesy of improvements in nutrition and medical care, and that this rising number of older people would eventually place a yoke around the younger generations of Americans who still remained active participants in the nation’s labor force and the chief source of its tax receipts. In essence, while the attendees did not believe that the nation was facing a demographic crisis just yet, they believed that it was fast approaching on the horizon, and that steps needed to be taken – quickly – to ensure that the nation’s institutions (public and private) would be ready to handle it. As a conference summary later stated, “older people constitute the most rapidly growing portion of our population.”

Using data from prior Census reports, the delegates had calculated that the number

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163 As Michael Harrington would later observe in *The Other America*, by 1959, “two-thirds of the people over sixty-five live with a spouse or a relative in a two-person household. They signify the breakdown of the old patterns of family living in the United States.” (Harrington, *The Other America*, 107).


165 Ibid.
of Americans aged 65 years or older constituted 4.1% of the overall U.S. population (and numbered approximately 3 million individuals), and that these figures had risen to 7.6% of the overall population (and numbered approximately 11 ¼ million individuals) by 1949.166

Also striking were the conference attendees’ frank acknowledgments that they frequently lacked sufficient information to adduce solutions to the problems of an aging population.167 As a summary report of the conference bluntly stated:

Very little is known about the number of aged persons with income from other sources, i.e., insurance annuities, private retirement systems, investments and other types of savings, contributions from friends or relatives, etc. There is only scanty information, also, on the extent to which income is received from more than one source. Surveys indicate that generally speaking, the larger the aged person’s income, the larger the number of sources from which it is derived.168

What the attendees at the National Conference on Aging did know, though, was that “the surveys made by the Social Security Administration of the income, assets, and living arrangements of old-age and survivors insurance beneficiaries suggest that half or more of the commercial and industrial


167 See, for example, Background Statement, Section III, National Conference on Aging, 1950. Arguably the most important section of the conference, the Income Maintenance section representatives could only conclude from limited data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and Social Security that “the aged…have lower incomes than other adults in the population,” but that “information on the number of beneficiaries of private retirement plans in industry is not available in detail.” The representatives further conceded that “we know even less about the number of older persons with income from privately accumulated assets…how many older persons are in receipt of dividends, interest, rents, or are living in whole or part on withdrawals from savings accounts or the sale of assets, is unknown.” (Ibid., 3). Based on information provided by Social Security, the representatives estimated that “between one fourth and one fifth of all persons 65 years of age or over were in receipt in December 1949 of benefits under social insurance programs, based on past employment or service.” (Ibid., 3). This lack of information about the income and assets held by older Americans was problematic for policymakers because, as the representatives noted, “perhaps the best measure of the effective ability of persons to save for old age is the amount of assets held by those now aged” (Ibid., 9).

workers who have retired in recent years have some assets but that such assets are typically small.” Based on the limited information at hand about the inadequacy of most people’s retirement assets, the conference delegates agreed that that the best way to reduce possible future financial burdens which supporting older people might place upon the federal treasury was to “enabl[e] the aged to do productive work in accordance with their capacity.” But the delegates realized that “this would mean change, change, change” because “nothing in our present cultural institutions…is adequate to deal with the consequence of this new development of the increasingly aged.”

Essentially, the conference delegates had concluded that existing levels of public and private support were adequate to sustain most people in their old age, and that the best way for older people to support themselves was to continue working for as long as they could. Encouraging older workers to remain in the labor force, though, undermined the assumptions that governed the Social Security Act and most private employers pension systems: namely, that most workers would exit the workforce at or around the age of 65, and that their re-entry would be at most on a part-time basis, limited by the penalties which Social Security applied to annual earnings above a certain threshold. While the conference delegates expressed their belief that “there are no insuperable obstacles to the employment of older people” because “management, labor and Government working together, could do the job,” it was not entirely clear by what mechanism this objective could be accomplished.

169 Background Statement, Section III, National Conference on Aging, 1950.
171 Ibid., 3.
Although the conference ultimately seemed more of a trial balloon to test public opinion than anything else, it did have the salutary effect of assembling for the first time a wide range of academic experts, elected officials, and appointed public servants from across the country to discuss and debate the issues of older Americans, and also of drawing press attention.\textsuperscript{172} For these reasons, Oscar Ewing pronounced it “an unqualified success.”\textsuperscript{173} This theme of increasing state action referred to in the following quote from Representative Sidney Yates (D-IL) during a congressional debate over his bill to create a House Select Committee on Problems of the Aging,

\begin{quote}
[E]ver since the National Conference on Aging called by the Federal Security Agency more than a year ago there has been a quickening of interest all over the country in creating a more satisfactory environment for aging people. My own State of Illinois set up a commission last year. My neighboring States of Michigan and Minnesota have set up study committees this year…All of these states and many others are desperately in need of information that will tell them the nature of the problems they face and how to go about meeting them.\textsuperscript{174}
\end{quote}

In addition, Congressman Yates pointed out that “scores of local communities and organizations are trying to go ahead without waiting for State leadership. They, too, are besieging the Federal Security Agency, the Department of Agriculture, and other Federal agencies for guidance and assistance.”\textsuperscript{175}

\begin{flushleft}
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\textsuperscript{172} For coverage of the 1950 conference’s conclusion, see Bess Furman, “Crusade for Aged Saluted by Ewing: U.S. Security Head Compares Conference Work to Drive Against Child Labor,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 16, 1950. Tamara Mann has insightfully observed that “the lasting results of the first National Conference on Aging would be the demonstration, albeit nascent, of the growing power of America’s senior citizens and the marriage of this power with Oscar Ewing’s hospital insurance program.” See Tamara Mann, “Honor Thy Father and Mother: Defining and Solving the Problem of Old Age in the United States, 1945-1961,” PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014, 97. See also Ibid., 115-116.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 2.
\end{flushleft}
It also reflected an emerging transformation in the federal government’s approach to the problem of old age security. Whereas the Roosevelt administration during the New Deal had labored mightily to encourage the retirement of older workers from the labor force – even going so far as to remove older workers from the W.P.A.’s employment roster in New Jersey – the Truman administration increasingly embraced the retention of older workers where possible. As Oscar Ewing had observed in his remarks to delegates assembled at the National Conference on Aging, “when all is said and done…I think most of your will agree that the question of continued employment – for those who desire work – reaches close to the heart of this whole problem of the aging.”

Ewing’s statement was in line with the Truman administration, which had begun to promote university and private philanthropic studies that sought to counter social stereotypes about older workers as less efficient and more costly than younger workers. Underlying this new approach to the problem of older people in a rapidly changing society was the unspoken argument that private employers could do more to keep older workers on rather than compelling them to retire at a defined age. Retaining older workers would also counteract the limited resources available to many retired workers, including those who were eligible to receive Social Security old-age insurance benefits. Those benefits remained quite low: In 1950, the average monthly benefit paid to 384,000 Social Security eligible was $33.24, or $332.45 in 2016 dollars.

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The Aftermath of the 1950 Conference

Roughly a year after the conclusion of the 1950 Conference on aging, Oscar Ewing was in San Francisco to address the annual convention of the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.). In his remarks, Ewing mentioned his recent proposal to the President to “supplement the present cash benefits under old-age and survivors insurance by also providing to beneficiaries hospitalization insurance covering up to sixty days a year.” Ewing hoped, as he put it, that the assembled A.F.L. delegates would “give it very serious thought” as a “simple, logical advancement of the traditional, pay-as-you-go, self-respecting, common-sense American idea of social insurance,” a wordy description which, nonetheless demonstrated the boundaries in which public discussions about Social Security and public responsibility for the elderly could operate in September 1951.

By that point, the Truman administration’s ability to shape national politics had been greatly weakened by Joseph McCarthy’s relentless attacks on the State Department from the Senate floor, as well as withering criticism over the president’s handling of the conflict in Korea. The amount of political capital left to spend for someone like Oscar Ewing was thus quite sparse. It is not clear if Ewing believed that his proposal had a realistic possibility of being enacted, or if he expected the A.F.L. to embrace it as truly the next logical step in Social Security, a program which had hitherto not been directly involved in providing health insurance to its beneficiaries. All the same, Ewing’s public announcement marked a new step in the continuing evolution of the senior state, which would rapidly come to embrace what historian Tamara Mann Tweel has aptly labeled the

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180 Ibid., 22.
181 At the 1951 convention, the AFL did pass a resolution affirming its support of “a broad national health insurance and public health program” and condemned the American Medical Association for its recent role in defeating the Truman administration’s proposed national health insurance plan, it did not specifically endorse Ewing’s proposal. See AFL Resolution in Speech – AFL Convention, San Francisco, California (September 19, 1951) file, in Federal Secur. Agency Subj. File, Federal Security Agency – General Correspondence, Box 29, Papers of Oscar R. Ewing, HSTL.
“Medical Security Solution” to old age in America, both for reasons of practicality and growing ideological alignment.\textsuperscript{182} It remained true, as Ewing conceded during an October 1951 Voice of America radio broadcast discussion on Social Security, that roughly 1 out of 6 workers in the United States still lacked access to Social Security and other related social insurance plans, and that the administration’s aspirations for expanding Social Security’s scale and scope to embrace as many workers as possible remained incomplete.\textsuperscript{183}

In December 1951, a year and a half after the 1950 conference, President Truman authorized the creation of a “President’s Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation.”\textsuperscript{184} The newly formed commission consisted primarily of physicians and hospital administrators, but also included such luminaries as labor leader Walter Reuther of the UAW and Chester Barnard, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, Ollie A. Randall, a longtime consultant to the Community Service Society of New York City as well as New York State’s Joint Legislative Committee on the Problems of Aging, as well as Gunnar Gundersen, M.D., a member of the American Medical Association’s

\textsuperscript{182} See Tamara Mann, “Honor Thy Father and Mother: Defining and Solving the Problem of Old Age in the United States, 1945-1961.” PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2014. Mann argues that “by 1961, the definition, the problem, and the solution to old age at the federal level had crystallized. Gone were the multifaceted definitions of aging and its attendant problems. In their stead, congressmen and policymakers came to agree that old age could be defined chronologically at the age of sixty-five and that the essential, and treatable, problem for citizens over sixty-five was poverty due to health failure.” While I concur with Mann that a “Medical Security Solution” gradually became a preferred option for federal policymakers who dealt with the problems of older Americans, I disagree that the solution to old age had been so simply reduced down to the issue of health maintenance. As I will argue in subsequent chapters, policymakers at the federal level persisted in their attempts to build a well-rounded and more fully developed welfare state for older Americans which encompassed but was not limited solely to health care issues.


(A.M.A.) Board of Trustees. The administration’s defeat by the A.M.A. had demonstrated that the A.M.A.’s opinion on the subject of national health insurance could not be disregarded, and Dr. Gundersen’s inclusion quietly reflected the Truman administration’s recognition of the A.M.A.’s power to make or break its health policy agenda.

Learning from their earlier missteps, Ewing and other administration officials altered their strategy of trying to enact national health insurance on a universal basis and opted to push for publicly subsidized health care for older Americans. They did so in the hope that a more limited program would rebut the argument that government intervention in the field of medicine was unwarranted. In pursuit of this goal, the President’s Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation met several times throughout 1952. At its July 1952 meeting, Lucille Smith, the Public Health Administrator for the U.S. Public Health Service, succinctly defined the Commission’s limited objectives, which notably did not make any visible mention of providing institutional support for national health insurance:

I think it is very important that we identify immediately the fact that in the United States the problem of chronic illness is not identical the problem of care of the aged since chronic illness affects all age groups and it is exceedingly important that we spend our efforts on the preventive aspects and begin long before people are old.

Smith’s opening statement was a pushback against long-held beliefs in the medical community (and throughout American society) that age and chronic illness were intrinsically linked, and that age itself was a form of illness. Specifically, her remarks reflected how the changes in the biological understandings of age, which had been pioneered at the University of Chicago and at the University of Michigan over the course of the previous decade, were beginning to seep into policymaking.

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185 “Summary of Prevention and Care of Chronic Illness, Panel on Care of Chronically Ill, May 22, 1952,” Joint Panel on Chronic Disease and Aging 7/9/52 misc. panel file, RG 220: Pres. Commission on Health Needs of the Nation, Box 10, HSTL.

186 “The President’s Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation, Joint Panel on Health of the Aging and Care of the Chronically Ill,” Wednesday, July 9, 1952 meeting transcript; p.5568, Joint panel on Chronic Disease & Aging 7/9/52 transcript, RG 220: Pres. Commission on Health Needs of the Nation; Box 10, HSTL.
circles, and would soon allow the case to be made for enacting broader social policies on behalf of older Americans. After all, if it was possible to become old without necessarily becoming chronically ill, that suggested that old age was merely a phase of life and not the result of some disease, as many medical practitioners had believed since the start of the twentieth century. As Smith observed, “ten years ago [in 1942], chronic illness was thought to be a problem of old age; today it is wisely recognized as a problem in all age groups.”

It also meant that appropriations on behalf of the elderly, such as providing health care, would not necessarily be a waste of money if it kept at least some elderly people healthy enough to continue working or being productive members of society rather than pointlessly prolonging the suffering of chronic invalids. While the quiet revolution in defining old age that had begun roughly ten years earlier would still require time to be acknowledged by the academic and scientific community, evidence of growing acceptance could be found in the increasing number of studies sponsored by private philanthropic foundations, state governments, and universities to determine what exactly happened to the human body in old age.

As Smith further pointed out in her testimony, the evolving understanding of old age was also accompanied by a changing understanding of chronic illness. As she observed:

In the year 1946 there began a very important national movement in planning for the chronically ill…when the American Public Welfare Association decided that it was high time they called to the attention of the people the fact that chronic illness was a major part of dependency and whereas unemployment had been in the thirties, in the forties chronic illness was the major thing bringing people on relief. The welfare people realized that they could not solve this problem but they also realized that unless somebody solved it the cost of relief would continue to mount.

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187 Ibid., 5571.
188 ‘The President’s Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation, Joint Panel on Health of the Aging and Care of the Chronically Ill,” Wednesday, July 9, 1952 meeting transcript; p.5569, Joint panel on Chronic Disease & Aging 7/9/52 transcript, RG 220: Pres. Commission on Health Needs of the Nation; Box 10, HSTL.
Here lay the continuity between the New Deal’s war on economic dependency in the 1930s and the attempts of the Truman administration to address the nation’s health needs in the 1940s. World War II had inadvertently revealed just how uneven decent health care coverage was in the United States; in many parts of the South, the West, and in impoverished communities nationwide, medical care barely existed at subsistence levels. The A.M.A., aware of this spotty coverage, had happily joined hands with President Truman when his administration had sought to expand the number of hospitals and medical training facilities in underserved areas. The thorny issue of assigning responsibility for the cost of relief (i.e., paying for health care) would end the hitherto happy alliance between the Truman administration and the A.M.A. As Smith pointed out,

chronic illness has a much higher incidence in the aged than in any other group...therefore, the aging of the population is producing an also very rapidly increasing volume of chronically ill people and disabled people...that increase in volume is at such a rate that it will force the attention of the public and of the professions on this problem. The mounting volume is such that society will simply have to find some way of dealing with it.189

In other words, the undeniable fact that health care costs were continuing to rise compelled the Truman administration and the A.M.A. to remain working partners, as their cooperation on the President’s Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation suggested would be the case. As social policy consultant Ollie Randall dryly observed during the same meeting, “I do not think it takes a very vivid imagination to realize that the maintenance of the health of this group [the aged] presents serious problems to the individuals themselves as well as to many people who are in the younger age groups who are carrying the responsibility of many older relatives.”190 Consequently, she added, “the health problems of the aged and the aging are an integral part of the nation’s health problem,

189 Ibid., 5580.
190 Ibid., 5587.
[and] the older age groups do require special attention...the solution to their problem cannot be found if they are entirely segregated from services to others or isolated from the community.”

The solution, Randall believed, was threefold: first, to acknowledge the need to expand and improve the nation’s infirmaries and nursing homes, and second to enhance the training of medical nursing and custodial care personnel. Along with these improvements, Randall emphasized the inadequacy of current old age assistance programs to pay for medical care for the aged. As she observed,

the economic status of a great majority of old people is such that adequate medical care can be provided for most of them only through substantial use of public funds...about a third of people over [the age of] 65 or about 4 million people are totally dependent upon public funds, [and] another third are estimated to be partially dependent upon either public resources or assistance from relatives.

In essence, the growing number of dependent elderly people in the United States was simultaneously becoming too heavy a burden upon both the public treasury and individual families, and a vicious cycle of dependency was taking root and growing stronger. As more families had to support their older relatives, it became more likely that such families might find their own economic resources stretched to the breaking point and beyond, and result in growing impoverishment not just for elderly individuals but for members of younger generations as well.

Though Randall left it unsaid in her testimony, it was clear to the other assembled members of the Commission that the question of how to address the growing number of chronically ill had

191 Ibid., 5589.
192 Randall was supported in her belief that families would prioritize the needs of children and younger members of the family over older members by Dr. Edwin Witte, who observed that “children are taken care in the great majority of cases as they should be in the families, and you have no public problem...on the other hand, the family under modern conditions does not take care of the aged member, and that creates an institutional problem.” Ibid., 5625-5626. As Michael Harrington later observed in *The Other America*, by 1960, approximately 500,000 people lived in nursing homes in the United States, but “only 58 per cent of these were considered acceptable by Government standards. And these figures understate the gravity of the problem, for they exclude unlicensed homes and units with three beds or less” (Harrington, *The Other America*, 117).
193 “The President’s Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation, Joint Panel on Health of the Aging and Care of the Chronically Ill,” Wednesday, July 9, 1952 meeting transcript; p.5594, Joint panel on Chronic Disease & Aging 7/9/52 transcript, RG 220: Pres. Commission on Health Needs of the Nation; Box 10, HSTL.
reopened the questions of how best to provide collective economic security which had vexed the New Dealers two decades beforehand. At the previous meeting of the Commission in May 1952, its assembled members had conceded as much when they resolved that “the health and welfare needs of the older citizen are inseparable…not only physical but also social, economic, psychological, and other factors must be combined in a “wholistic” approach to the problem.” In keeping with this approach, the Commission recommended that the responsibility for meeting the needs of older citizens be shared by “the community – local, state, or national…through private enterprise, voluntary organizations and governmental effort.” While acknowledging that it would be necessary to work together with the nation’s private social welfare organizations, the insistence that government had a necessary role to play in solving the question of old age economic dependency revealed the continuing legacy of New Deal-era reform liberalism.

Throughout the last days of the Truman administration, Oscar Ewing remained as busy as ever campaigning on behalf of the causes that he and other New Deal liberals had long held dear. In September 1952, he spoke before the first annual conference of State Commissioners on Aging in Washington, D.C. Like the 1950 conference, the state commissioners’ conference brought together officials from various state social welfare departments, many of which were still incipient in nature. In his remarks, Ewing greeted the assembled delegates from the fifteen states which

194 “Summary of Prevention and Care of Chronic Illness, Panel on Care of Chronically Ill, May 22, 1952,” pg. 5, Joint Panel on Chronic Disease and Aging 7/9/52 misc. panel file, RG 220: Pres. Commission on Health Needs of the Nation, Box 10, HSTL.
195 The development of State Commissions on Aging varied widely on a state-by-state basis. In California, the administration of Governor Earl Warren had appointed an “Interdepartmental Coordinating Committee on Aging,” in 1948, but the committee was solely advisory in nature. Additionally, it lacked the power to award or to administer state funding. See California Department of Aging, “Description,” Inventory of the Department of Aging Records, California State Archives, available at Online Archive of California, source URL: http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt529027dh/ (accessed March 5, 2017). Other states represented at the conference included Arizona, Florida, and Massachusetts. See “States Put First in Care of Aging,” The New York Times, September 11, 1952.
196 For example, California did not hold its first state-wide Governor’s Conference on Aging in 1955, three years afterward. See California Department of Aging, “Description,” Inventory of the Department of Aging Records, California State Archives, available at Online Archive of California, source URL:
had dispatched them to Washington, and emphasized the federal government’s role in facilitating the conference. 197 “We are here not to read set speeches or to make reports,” he said, adding later that “we expect you to do the talking…the Planning Committee has been meticulously careful to avoid imposing its own ideas of what this Conference should discuss,” an indirect reference to Ewing’s proposed program to provide health insurance to some Social Security recipients, and a sign as well of the perilous political landscape through which the Truman administration was still carefully navigating. 198 By this point, Ewing was complete anathema to the A.M.A. along with many members of the powerful conservative congressional coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans, and so his activities had become increasingly limited to advocating on behalf of causes which did not necessarily require congressional input or command high profile press attention.

Within this more limited ambit of movement, though, Ewing remained determined to act. As he observed in his address to the commissioners, “two years ago there were not more than two official State Commissions or Committees functioning in this field”; now, he noted, there were fourteen state commissions, with more being planned. 199 Ewing interpreted this development as tangible proof of progress. Implicit in his remarks was his satisfaction that, even if action at the federal level had been frustrated by the AMA and congressional hostility, there might still be hope

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197 During the course of the conference, Derek Van Dyke, an Arizona state legislator, called for state commissions on aging to be permanently separated from the Federal Government because of the potential for resistance “on the local level” if the commissions were “identified with a Federal Government agency.” See “States Put First in Care of Aging,” The New York Times, September 11, 1952.


199 Ibid., 3.
for meaningful solutions at the state and local levels of government, where the partisan rancor seemed practically somnolent in comparison to Washington, D.C. Underscoring his nascent faith in the power of individual states and local communities to carry out needed reforms, Ewing noted that while “there [were] many things the Federal Government can do” to help solve the economic and social problems of older Americans, ultimately “the real job must be done by the States and communities – by individuals and groups helping their own neighbors.”

Ewing’s emphasis on the need for subnational units of government and local community action to “solve the problems of older Americans” reflected an emerging belief among some reform-minded liberals that efforts to use government power on behalf of older Americans would not be successfully achieved solely at the federal level in the near future, given the strident opposition of the A.M.A. and other powerful centers of organized political resistance. Instead, if such efforts were to succeed, they would require the active participation of state and local officials as well as local community organizations. This pivot in favor of using local governance to achieve a national goal marked a quiet shift in tactics utilized by reformers who sought to strengthen the nation’s social welfare net for older Americans. Repeated efforts to push through change at the national level had been stymied for a variety of reasons, including the resurgence of a conservative governing majority in Congress and the unwillingness of the Roosevelt administration to challenge conservative legislators after the disastrous 1938 and 1942 midterm elections, which had reduced the number of Democratic congressmen and senators who were able to support more progressive legislation. This blockade did not lift after Harry Truman’s upset electoral victory in 1948, which had also restored Democratic, though not progressive, control of Congress. Instead, the Truman administration’s rout

200 Ibid., 4. In an interview on the Voice of America radio broadcast three days later on September 11, 1952, Ewing reiterated his belief that “it is the State Governments and the local communities which have most of the responsibility for developing the various services for these older people to enable them to live happier and better adjusted lives.” See Interview Transcript, Oscar R. Ewing, Voice of America Broadcast, pg. 4, in “Interview – Radio, ‘Voice of America’ (Sept. 11, 1952),” in Federal Secur. Agency Subj. File, Federal Security Agency – General Correspondence, Box 29, Papers of Oscar R. Ewing, HSTL.
at the hands of the A.M.A. in the multi-year battle over national health insurance, as well as the resurgent popular fear of centralized state power that characterized the early years of the Cold War, helped to paralyze further efforts at national reform and narrowed the range of possible legislative policy outcomes.

Faced with staunch resistance at the national level, social reformers like Ewing and Wilbur Cohen, as well as labor leaders like Walter Reuther, had instead settled upon a more limited and ultimately fragmented course. Organized labor, largely blocked in its attempts to win a meaningful expansion of the welfare state after the end of World War II, made a separate peace with a resurgent corporate leadership. Disastrous midterm election results in 1946 and 1950 deeply cut into the number of surviving congressional liberals on Capitol Hill. As a result, the Truman administration’s liberal coterie, led primarily by Oscar R. Ewing, opted to lay the groundwork for a scaled back version of the broader welfare state, which had first been outlined by Dr. Eveline Burns and the NRPB during World War II. This more limited welfare state consisted largely of adjustments to Social Security and a universal health insurance plan limited only to older people. This shift in strategy explicitly aimed to utilize favorable social attitudes towards older people as a way to advance stalled social reform policy goals – in effect, to try and mobilize elderly people (and their families) as well as broader public opinion as an effective counterweight to the power of the A.M.A. and other organized medical and business groups hostile to any significant expansion of existing public social welfare programs.

In order to build the case for the necessity of public health insurance for older people, the Truman administration had turned to the select group of academic experts and researchers who had begun during the late 1940s to investigate the changing social and economic conditions of older Americans in various urban and rural communities scattered throughout the nation. Through conferences like the 1950 National Conference on Aging, as well as regional and state conferences,
academic researchers, social welfare experts, and public officials forged a cohesive policy community that sought to investigate the many dimensions of old age in America. Chastised by defeat at the national level, this community sought to implement programs and initiatives at the local and state level. These efforts were accelerated by growing popular discontent in places with concentrated populations of older people such as southern California and New York City, where local officials increasingly struggled to understand the full dimensions of the problems faced by their older constituents. With limited financial resources, these officials welcomed partnerships with private philanthropic organizations to fund social science studies, thus cementing a new alliance between academic researchers, local officials, and social welfare experts.

Conclusion

Demand for expertise resulted in the growth of new organizations such as the National Coalition on the Aging, an outgrowth of the long-established National Social Welfare Association, and a stronger intermediary role for more established voluntary social welfare organizations like the American Public Welfare Association. These voluntary sector organizations played a vital role in supplying the necessary expertise to local and state officials as they adapted and developed new government services to assist older Americans that would balance the competing demands of limited funds and rising popular demands for assistance. Ultimately, as national programs for older Americans like Social Security remained decidedly modest and private pension plans favored certain categories of workers over others, public officials increasingly turned to the voluntary sector to devise policy solutions that would replicate the previously private social and economic functions performed by individual families in meeting the needs of older people that Social Security and private pensions were unable to cover. These efforts achieved significant success, but as the cost of medical care, hospitalization, and prescription drugs continued to rise during the 1950s, this infrastructure would increasingly be directed towards the enactment of national health insurance for
the elderly as a way to alleviate the growing financial strains which the costs associated with providing health care coverage to older people had begun to place on families and local and state governments.

Nevertheless, the expansion into providing health insurance to older people risked obscuring the continuing problems with the Social Security program, which had mainly been designed to provide older and retired male workers with a form of economic support in retirement that did not negate their previously prominent status as the primary family wage-earner or necessitate their becoming a financial burden upon their families or the public. In essence, the earnings received under the old-age insurance program would replace both the poorhouse and public assistance without replicating the least desirable features of either. Despite Social Security’s original intent, by 1946, twice as many people received payments from Social Security’s noncontributory old-age assistance program as drew monthly benefits from its contributory-based old-age insurance system, an imbalance that was nearly the reverse of what Social Security’s architects had intended.201

Moreover, while Social Security’s framers had assumed that old-age assistance would be a temporary federal salve to lighten the financial burdens upon states and localities during the economic crisis of the 1930s, its southern supporters in Congress saw no reason to wind down the program once near-full employment and steady economic growth were restored after the end of World War II. For many southern states, Social Security’s old-age assistance program generously supplemented meager existing state old-age pension programs but distributed the costs of doing so on a nationwide basis because the revenue to support the program was collected from general federal taxes rather than earmarked payroll taxes. Southern politicians therefore saw no reason to

201 A.H. Raskin, “Relief for Aged Soars in U.S. As Social Security Falls Short,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 1946. Old-age assistance payments totaled $800,000,000 in 1946 (Ibid.) Financially, it made more sense for older people to receive old-age assistance monthly payments, which averaged $34.43 nationwide. By contrast, enrollees in the old-age insurance program could expect on average to receive $24.83 for men and $19.83 for women. (Ibid.)
shift the program’s footing back towards contributory social insurance because such an alteration had the potential to divert significant federal monies.

Alongside their assumption that Social Security’s old-age assistance program would be a temporary measure that would be jettisoned once the Social Security old-age insurance program was fully operational, liberal New Dealers and other reform-minded individuals had expected that the expansion of Social Security into a fully-fledged, modern public welfare system was only a matter of time. However, this development did not materialize, as the unfortunate fate of the National Resources Planning Board vividly revealed. Instead, defense spending during World War II had reduced unemployment to levels not seen since before the onset of the Great Depression. That turn of events had helped weaken the arguments once advanced by New Dealers on behalf of the Social Security program. It demonstrated that the United States did not have a stagnant “mature economy” in which mass unemployment would be a persistent feature, with a fixed number of jobs that had to be rationed, and thereby government intervention in order to ration limited employment and financial resources was a matter of national survival.

As the ideological case for the New Deal’s reforms weakened over the course of the 1940s, so, too, did the impetus for further action. The enactment of an incomplete Social Security system, state old age pensions, and improved economic conditions proved to be sufficient during the course of the 1940s in diminishing the mass appeal of the Townsend Movement and its facsimiles in other states, though not entirely, as the continuing battle over public old-age pensions in California, Colorado, and Washington State revealed. Reform liberals like Dr. Eveline Burns had hoped that government domestic policy planning for the postwar world would pick up where the New Deal had left off in 1938-1939, and that a more comprehensive, rational public welfare system, on the model of Great Britain’s Beveridge Plan, perhaps, would ensure that an economic catastrophe like the
Great Depression would not be possible again, and that the social and political instability that had followed in the wake of the Great Depression would be relegated to the past.\textsuperscript{202}

The failure to complete the development of Social Security into a more comprehensive program at the national level during the 1940s, created an opportunity for other actors to once more take the stage, and inadvertently helped to build the case for the senior state. Because the Social Security system remained underdeveloped, many state and local authorities still found themselves frequently compelled to deal with the issue of economic security for older people whether they wanted to or not, and this issue became more pressing after the war ended and the nation returned to a peacetime economic footing, with the expectation that older workers would retire, leave the workforce, and be replaced by younger workers. It was no accident, that New York’s pioneering Joint Legislative Committee on the Problems of the Aging was established in 1947, or that its scope and functions were expanded in 1949. As New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey observed in his 1949 message to the New York legislature, the Federal Old-Age and Survivors’ Insurance program had “failed” to create a financially sustainable welfare system because of its limited coverage and even more limited benefits. Thus, the impetus had shifted back to individual states like New York to try and forge a workable solution to the problem of providing economic security in old age.\textsuperscript{203}

But solutions to this problem were not immediately forthcoming. The social and political atmosphere at the end of World War II and into the early Cold War years was not conducive to further expansion of state power, as the failure of Franklin Roosevelt’s proposed Second Bill of Rights and the dramatic defeat of the Truman administration’s proposed national health insurance program demonstrated. Beleaguered proponents of the welfare state like Federal Security Agency Administrator Oscar Ewing, Associate Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and historian


Henry Steele Commager attempted to defend the welfare state as a necessary safeguard against the temptations of more radical political alternatives like communism, but the balance of public opinion seemed more inclined towards the position articulated by the American Medical Association, which decried expansion of the welfare state as a pernicious threat to individual liberty in the United States.204

State and local officials who sought to deal with the issue of old-age economic insecurity therefore faced a quandary: how to provide needed economic and social support for a category of citizens without running afoul of rising anti-statist sentiments or running the risk of supporting programs that would be financially unsustainable for limited state budgets. Solutions varied according to variables of geography, wealth, and ideology. In less wealthy southern states, local officials remained content to rely upon Social Security’s old age assistance program, which effectively funneled federal funds to older southern whites. In some wealthier northern states like New York and Illinois, state and local officials began to explore partnerships with the private welfare community, both as a way to access additional funding and to increase the reach of limited social programs.

This public and private cooperation was born of necessity, but as the 1950 National Conference on Aging revealed, state and local welfare administrators were hungry to forge new partnerships that would enable them to assess the needs of a growing elderly population and devise policy solutions that could be implemented without having to depend upon federal action, since dramatic federal action on Social Security and national health insurance seemed a distant possibility at best. Finally, in some western states like California and Colorado, popular agitation and

organization of older people into mobilized voters by old-age pension groups continued to roil state
politics and alarm observers elsewhere, who worried that a revival of the Townsend Movement or
something similar might elevate a demagogue to high national power.

While public and private officials wrestled with the issue of economic security in old-age,
the failure to enact national health insurance in the late 1940s, and the subsequent deliberate strategy
by liberal reformers to try and secure its enactment via the backdoor of adding health insurance for
the elderly to the existing Social Security system, would set the agenda and accelerate the
construction of the senior state in the 1950s and 1960s. Health insurance via the Social Security
system would become a focal point of liberal reformers during the 1950s, despite (or perhaps
because) the Social Security system’s existing mechanisms to provide economic security in old-age
remained grossly inadequate for achieving that purpose.

The solution, liberal reformers like Wilbur Cohen hoped, would be a new approach to social
welfare that embraced the public and private sector. In practice, this meant accepting newly revived
instruments of retirement security like private pensions in order to fill the financial gap left by
inadequate Social Security benefits. It also meant new connections to the private welfare sector,
which had begun to pay more attention to the possible economic and social implications of a
growing aging population in the United States. Over the course of the 1950s, these links would be
strengthened further, in part by the Eisenhower administration, which favored non-interference on
the part of the federal government in social welfare matters, and also by liberal reformers and labor
organizations, which stepped in to fill the gap left by the federal government.
By 1950, a new pattern was beginning to emerge in how federal, state, and local officials dealt with the issue of providing economic security in old-age. The Social Security system remained incomplete, and the development of a new privatized system of pensions and fringe benefits provided by many employers which had begun to take shape during World War II had begun to accelerate. However, this new private welfare system remained uneven in its reach. While some industries – notably automobile and steelmaking – witnessed the expansion of generous new private welfare benefits as employers begrudgingly sought to accommodate themselves to the presence of organized labor, this development did not extend to all employers. As a result, the level of economic security in old age that older Americans could expect to receive varied widely, with race, gender, class, and employment status playing determinative roles.

Consequently, social welfare officials at the local, state, and federal level increasingly found themselves confronted during the 1950s with the reemergence of economic insecurity in old age as a pressing issue of political and social importance that required active intervention and inventive policymaking. However, unlike during the Great Depression, when mass unemployment had made it easier to advance the ideological arguments necessary for the development of a more universal system like Social Security, unemployment and poverty after the end of World War II was increasingly concentrated among groups that were not benefitting as much from the postwar economic surge in private sector employment.

The failure during the Truman administration to secure a significant expansion of the welfare state – and the increasing unlikelihood that such expansion at the national level would be forthcoming in the near future, given the chill of the Cold War on domestic politics in the United
States – shifted the center of action back towards individual states, local communities, and new voluntary organizations which began to appear during the decade between the 1950 National Conference on Aging and its successor the 1961 White House Conference on Aging. During the Eisenhower administration, this tendency was especially pronounced, as senior members of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare tasked with examining and studying the problems and needs of the nation’s growing older population emphasized an advisory and consultative role for the federal government in this field rather than an active and interventionist one, as had been the case during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations.

The lack of substantive action on the part of the federal government and the limited ability of state and local governments to fully resolve a fundamentally national problem left a vacuum in the nation’s social welfare system that different actors competed to fill during this period. Older but still mobile individuals and couples living on fixed incomes, encouraged by the prospect of cheap newly developed private housing and overall lower costs of living than in the Northeast and Midwest, began to move to Florida and other southern and western locales, a process which would continue during the rest of the twentieth century.¹ Unions like the United Steelworkers of America experimented with new programs designed to improve the quality of life of their retired members.² These new experimental directions in social welfare policy for older people aimed not to provide economic security, but rather to offer a kind of social security that reconnected older people to the communities in which they lived or had worked. If the emphasis during the 1930s and 1940s had been on providing a modicum of economic security in old age, by the 1950s this vision had also

begun to encompass the belief that guarantees of economic security were no longer sufficient, and that problems of old age were not solely limited to inadequate individual or family financial resources.

However, the issue of economic security in old age had never entirely receded. During the 1950s, this issue became increasingly tangled with the broader issue of health security. After 1950, senior officials in the Truman administration and later congressional liberals and union leaders had begun to focus on amending the original Social Security Act in order to provide health insurance to Social Security recipients. Their purpose in doing so was to shift the battleground in the long running war over national health insurance in the United States by stressing the health care needs of older Americans, whom they assumed would be a far more appealing constituency for such a bold expansion of public assistance. Essentially, it was a deliberate move designed to make the expansion of the federal government’s role in facilitating collective economic security seem far less controversial to skeptical public opinion and wary opponents like the American Medical Association (A.M.A.).

At the same time, the tactical shift to emphasizing publicly subsidized health care coverage was not only the product of a strategic decision made by its proponents. It was also a response to a financial problem that had already begun to roil labor-management relations and to upset public finances as well as state and local politics. In 1955, for example, a California state report noted that “the medical needs of Old-Age [Social] Security recipients and the manner of meeting them constitute a problem which is increasingly predominant,” and as Dora L. Costa observes, “state and
local expenditures on vendor medical payments rose by almost 130 percent between 1950 and 1956” in the United States.³

It was perhaps no accident, then, that California would again prove to be the launch pad for another large-scale old-age advocacy organization with national ambitions. Twenty years after the Townsend Movement had spread out far and wide from Long Beach, California, the American Association of Retired Persons (or A.A.R.P.) founded by Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus in 1957 would discover unexpectedly high mass demand for its new voluntary group health insurance plan originally aimed at its core membership of retired white middle-class teachers. In a short period of time, the A.A.R.P. went from a small, regional organization to national prominence, a transition that was partly facilitated by the Eisenhower administration and by some members of the business and medical community who were eager to offer a compelling and viable alternative to the proposed expansion of the Social Security system to include health insurance advocated by some congressional Democrats, local and state welfare officials, and organized labor leaders. Though access to affordable health insurance was only part of the A.A.R.P.’s original founding purpose – namely, to permit older people to lead independent lives without requiring public or private assistance – the organization’s emphasis on expanding social and community services as a necessary component of active senior living harkened an evolution in how federal, state, and local welfare officials would approach the intertwined economic and social problems of older people in America.

In sum, the senior state underwent the first of its two major postwar shifts during the 1950s. In a semi-coordinated fashion, state and local welfare officials, along with their counterparts in the private voluntary sector and the organized labor movement, had come to appreciate the limitations

of the existing Social Security system and the growing number of private pension systems, both of which continued to offer meager financial assistance to selected categories of workers. As rising medical and hospitalization costs outstripped the economic resources of individual retirees and their families and threatened to overwhelm the overall fiscal stability of corporate, labor union, and public budgets, expansion of affordable coverage – whether by private insurance companies or by public means – became a paramount goal for the architects of the senior state. They worried that if such costs were not arrested, the expenses associated with providing health care coverage would require a more dramatic restructuring of welfare programs at a time when such funds were both limited and increasingly needed to meet other social needs associated with the dramatic postwar population expansion in the United States. In the late 1940s, the problem of economic security in old age had been conceived of in terms that were almost entirely financial in nature; ten years later, that problem had been redefined to include not only economic security but also health security as a fundamental right for older Americans.

The Golden Years?

If, as Eric Hobsbawm has written, the thirty years immediately following the end of World War II were “golden years” of increasingly widespread affluence and growing prosperity for the developed, capitalist nations of Western Europe and North America, economic growth during this period did not necessarily spread its blessings evenly. After the end of World War II, older workers were frequently dismissed in order to open up employment opportunities for returning World War II veterans. Leaving the workforce, though, also meant losing access to a steady source of income

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5 As Dwight MacDonald wrote in his 1963 New Yorker review of Michael Harrington’s The Other America, “the post-1940 decrease in poverty was not due to policies or actions of those who are not poor, those in positions of power and responsibility. The war economy needed workers, wages went up, and the poor became less poor. When economic stasis set in, the rate of decrease in poverty slowed down proportionately, and it is still slow.” See Dwight McDonald, “Our Invisible Poor,” The New Yorker, January 19, 1963. Available at http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1963/01/19/our-invisible-poor (accessed September 24, 2016).
sufficient to adequately maintain a household. As a University of Chicago-sponsored study of Kansas City’s older population published in 1952 observed, “the problem of financial security in old age is not an ordinary “poverty” problem. Many of the impoverished aged have [sic] had substantial middle-class incomes during their active lives. Public assistance cases occur in all parts of the city.”6 Invoking the specter of the Cold War, the Kansas City study intoned that “the United States and Western Europe have aging populations; the Communist countries do not. National survival may depend in part on our ability to utilize older workers at a time when the young are called to military service…in short, an aging population is not only a moral and humanitarian problem, but also a utilitarian problem of great importance.”7

The solution, according to the study, was “to change the conditions that produce economic dependency, social isolation, and long-term illness in old age; and we also need to assure the welfare of those who become dependent.”8 Statistics collected by the federal government on old age poverty supplemented the findings of the Kansas City study, and shed light on the growing number of older people who were increasingly turning to public assistance due to inadequate personal financial resources. Of the approximately 12 million older people in the United States in 1950 (defined as persons aged 65 years or older) only slightly more than half had income support from either continued employment or social insurance. Additionally, approximately 23% of all older people were receiving some form of public assistance exclusive of Social Security payments or income received from private pensions.9

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
The growing number of postwar studies conducted on the economic and social needs of America’s growing older population had its origins in academic research conducted at the University of Chicago by a loose, informal network of trained sociologists and statisticians. In 1948, University of Chicago sociologists Ernest W. Burgess, Ruth S. Cavan, and Robert J. Havighurst undertook a study of older Americans in order to determine “what interests these people may have, of how they are spending their time, or the kind of work they do.”¹⁰ Burgess, along with his colleague Robert E. Park, had founded the famed Chicago School of Sociology, and had conducted pioneering studies of urban life, crime, family, and marriage in American life. With the assistance of his colleagues at the University of Chicago and elsewhere, Burgess now sought to undertake a groundbreaking study of aging in American life.

Though Burgess and his collaborators were not the first sociologists to professionally address the subject, there was a growing urgency to his study. As Burgess and his colleagues knew, the number of older Americans was rising in a twofold manner: first, in terms of aggregate population, and second, the percentage of Americans who could be classified as “older” had also increased significantly during the 1940s. Despite this shift in the nation’s demographics, the amount of scholarly research available to help the nation’s policymakers make informed decisions about its growing older population was surprisingly limited.

Instead, in many instances policymakers were making decisions based on educated guesswork. In perhaps the most famous instance of such guesswork, the architects of the Social

Security Act had arbitrarily selected the age of 65 as the age of benefit entitlement.\textsuperscript{11} Burgess’ study spearheaded at the University of Chicago would therefore begin the process of filling in the gaps about the lives of older Americans. The questions that the study sought to answer were difficult. At its base, the study wanted to know who older Americans really were, where they lived, and how they conducted their lives. These and other questions remained to be answered, as public officials, private philanthropies, and other interested parties tried to decide how best to allocate limited resources and develop solutions that could mitigate the social and economic challenges which a growing population of older people seemed increasingly likely to impose upon their communities. By putting together enough data, the study aimed to paint a portrait of older people that would be both scientifically rigorous and useful for public policy practitioners.

Burgess, Cavan, and Havighurst were not the only academics investigating America’s aging population. At the University of Michigan, Clark Tibbitts and Wilma Donahue were already deeply involved in their community studies of older residents in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and surrounding towns and villages in Washtenaw County. Additionally, Tibbitts and Donahue also led and directed the University of Michigan’s Institute for Human Adjustment, which, over the course of the late 1940s and into the 1950s, had become a focal point of professional exchange among government officials, academics, and private welfare practitioners for delving into the numerous issues generated by the aging of American society.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} As Wilbur Cohen (one of the junior level staffers for the Committee on Economic Security responsible for devising the original Social Security Act) later wrote, “There was no scientific, social or gerontological basis for the selection [of the age of 65] . . . it was the general consensus that 65 was the most acceptable age.” See Wilbur J. Cohen, \textit{Retirement Policies Under Social Security} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) 24.

\textsuperscript{12} For more on Tibbitts and Donahue, see “Biography,” Institute of Gerontology (University of Michigan) Records 1948-1987, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, available online at: http://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-86996?byte=21750099;focusrgn=bioghist;subview=standard;view=reslist (accessed August 18, 2016).
The Problem of Older Workers in a Growing Economy

In a sign of the Institute’s growing importance as a meeting point between academic researchers and federal officials, Ewan Clague, the Commissioner of Labor Statistics for the U.S. Department of Labor, gave an address at the University of Michigan in July 1948. In his speech, Clague explained the federal government’s emerging understanding of the scope of the issues facing older Americans, and focused primarily on older workers (a group he defined as those workers aged 45 years or older). As he and other federal officials had come to understand the matter, there was “no particular problem of aging and employability,” given that older workers had left the overall labor force during the Great Depression, but many had subsequently reentered the workforce during the wartime home front labor shortage between 1941 and 1945.13

In other words, Clague believed that the relative employability of older workers rested less upon the fact that such workers were old, and more on the overall manpower needs of the economy. As Clague acknowledged,

[d]uring the depression years one of the reasons advanced for the passage of Social Security legislation was that it would encourage retirement of older workers, and thus make room for younger men. However, the actual scale of old age benefits has never provided a reasonable choice to the older workers. Most of the retirements under old age insurance have been forced upon the worker by previous unemployment…With the higher costs of living existing today, these benefits are even less of an inducement to retire.14

13 Ewan Clague, “Aging and Employability,” July 22, 1948, Address to the Charles A. Fisher Memorial Institute on Aging, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, California and West Coast Labor and Industrial Relations, selected publications, IRLE-LB01. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library, University of California, Berkeley. Accessed via the Online Archive of California at http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6pf/admin/#prefercite-1.3.4. Clague would make addresses similar to this one over the course of the next several years at a wide variety of venues across the United States. See for example Ewan Clague, “Problems of the Aging Worker,” Summary of Address before the Tenth Annual Industrial Nurses Conference, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 19, 1950 in California and West Coast Labor and Industrial Relations, selected publications, IRLE-LB01. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library, University of California, Berkeley. Accessed via the Online Archive of California at http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6pf/admin/#prefercite-1.3.4.
14 Ibid., 3.
The inadequacy of Social Security benefits had, in turn, led some unions to demand private pension plans able to close the gap between Social Security benefits and the cost of living and to emphasize seniority rights in the collective bargaining agreements they forged with corporate management. Such plans were necessarily tied to gainful employment and frequently based upon years of vested service, and as a result they favored long-term workers (and therefore workforce stability) over older workers with fewer years left to work.15 In the words of a report later published by the Federal Security Agency,

> When the program [Social Security] was adopted in 1935, it was the intent of Congress that this program should become the Nation’s primary method of preventing dependency in old-age. This expectation was not realized, however, because only a little more than half of the Nation’s jobs were under the program and the millions of workers who had already retired or did do soon after the program began had no opportunity to qualify for benefits.16

Even the subsequent amendments to Social Security enacted in 1939 “proved to be inadequate” which resulted in “many beneficiaries…living at income levels considerably below those prevailing for public assistance in a given locality…benefits for a retired worker and his wife averaged about $41 [per month] in December 1949.”17

Ultimately, the inadequacy of benefits under Social Security’s old-age insurance provisions combined with the inability of many older workers to secure gainful employment had again created a political and social climate in which poverty in old-age was rising by the late 1940s. As had been the case during the Great Depression, many impoverished older people increasingly turned to public

15 Ibid., 7.
assistance for help. As a 1950 Federal Security Agency report later noted, “in December 1949, more than 2.7 million persons, or 241 persons per 1,000 persons in the population 65 years of age and over, were receiving old-age assistance…in mid-1948 about one recipient in 16 was getting old-age assistance in addition to his old-age and survivors insurance benefit.”

In other words, while more workers (approximately 7.7 million people) were covered by Social Security’s old age insurance program than by its old age assistance program (approximately 2.7 million people), those covered under the old age insurance program were still resorting to the old age assistance program, a situation the architects of the Social Security Act had assumed would be a temporary bug rather than a permanent feature of the system. Additionally, a growing number of unemployed older workers presented a challenge for policymakers like Clague, who believed that “if truly adequate and reasonable benefits are established for the oldest workers (over 65), then there will be pressure to lower the age limits and bring in the unemployed in the next lower age groups.”

Invoking the ghost of the Townsend Movement, Clague warned that “in times of severe unemployment the numbers of these [older] persons may be so great as to constitute a powerful social and political force.”

Rather than wait for that development to transpire, the superior alternative, Clague reasoned, was for the federal government – in conjunction with local and state governments, as well as

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18 See Background Statement, Section III, National Conference on Aging, 1950.
21 Ibid., 4.
concerned private organizations— to encourage older workers to remain in the workforce beyond the age of 65. As Clague argued, “the constructive long-run solution of the problem is the development of jobs and occupations which can be adequately filled by older workers.”22 As he recognized, though, “the major attack on the problem will have to come within industry itself, which employs the vast proportion of the labor force” even as Clague conceded that “I have no intention here of saddling businessmen and employers generally with this problem.”23 Instead, he held out hope that a coalition of “the community” and industry would forge a workable solution that would meet the needs of older workers for gainful employment, or else “unemployment and destitution” among millions of older workers would become chronic, and they might in time become “numerous enough to force us to some kind of social action.” Otherwise, Clague asserted, “what we may get from such pressures may be very unsatisfactory— socially, economically and politically.”24

Neither Clague nor his colleagues in the federal government were alone in their growing concern over the potential social and political disruption which a growing army of unemployed older workers might be capable of. A few months before Clague’s speech at the University of Michigan, the National Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.) had made its views on the subject clear. Speaking before the New York League of Business and Professional Women on March 7, 1948, Phyllis H. Moehrle, a N.A.M. vice president, noted that “N.A.M. feels that a great deal remains to be done…Industry has a major responsibility to hire as many older people as possible.”25 To this end, Moehrle announced that NAM and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce had joined forces “in a campaign to interest employers in the problem of physically handicapped and older workers,

22 Ibid., 6-8.
23 Ibid., 8-9.
24 Ibid., 9.
and the importance of making every possible effort to provide increased employment opportunities for these groups of our citizens.”

In language redolent of advocates for corporate-sponsored welfare capitalism in the 1920s, Moehrle stated that “good management does not think it is fair or good business to let out a long-service employee without some provision for assisting him to maintain a reasonable standard of living.”

Taking aim at the recent efforts by the AFL and the CIO as well as other unions to gain some measure of control over pension plan administration and funding in collective bargaining agreements, Moehrle made clear N.A.M.’s hostility to such efforts. The N.A.M. insisted instead on the right of employers to avoid “having a workforce [that] does not become too heavily loaded with older people.”

While agreeing with federal officials like Oscar Ewing that much work remained to be done to “change public concepts about age” in order to eradicate “false ideas which people have about the influence of age on ability,” Moehrle asserted that this task could best be accomplished by voluntary efforts and suasion within and among members of the business community, and there were “no panaceas, no formulas” which could rightfully be imposed by either unions or elected officials on management hiring and firing decisions.

Instead, Moehrle argued that “full employment offers the most effective solution,” but that “this can’t be achieved without increasing industrial activity and [creating] an atmosphere in which business can function.”

If unions or the government insisted on exerting “an undue or artificial pressure in behalf of the older aged” that would “result in senseless discrimination against youth…there is no point in merely transferring the problem from one group of workers to

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26 Ibid., 2.
27 Ibid., 3.
28 Ibid., 5.
29 Ibid., 6.
another…we can’t set one group against another.” N.A.M.’s strategy was clear: by defining the problem of aging workers solely as “an individual problem” rather than a collective one, it could portray itself as a protector of the rights of individual workers and thereby put labor unions on the defensive.

N.A.M. thereby skillfully employed the rights-based language of New Deal liberalism in order to buttress traditional corporate control over private employer practices. It argued that government or union interference based on “arbitrary age requirements or physical characteristics” was impeding employers from providing truly full employment, and if such barriers were removed, then employers would once again feel confident enough to employ and hire all qualified workers. N.A.M.’s main objective was to simultaneously preserve the ability of private employers to oversee their workforces as they saw fit without giving the appearance of discrimination or favoritism, even if the actual, private day-to-day practices of a significant proportion of its members suggested just that.

The Desmond Committee and New York’s Campaign against Age Discrimination

N.A.M.’s concerns were not merely with what the federal government might do in the realm of employment hiring practices. In states like New York and California that had active state-level legislative committees examining the problems of older workers, evidence was beginning to mount of widespread discrimination by employers against older and handicapped workers. In December 1949, Ewan Clague appeared before the New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Problems

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30 Ibid.
of the Aging at the request of its chairman, State Senator Thomas C. Desmond. Desmond and his committee had successfully pushed in the past for important investigations into potentially discriminatory employment practices in New York, but the amount of information at his fingertips was confined primarily to New York State. Clague’s task was therefore to help the Committee ascertain which discriminatory employment practices in New York were also present elsewhere in the nation, and to provide information collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics about the employability of older workers. As Clague had explained in his speech at the University of Michigan earlier that same year, the chief problem confronting older workers was twofold: “on the one hand, the advances of medical science enabled a growing proportion of the population to survive into old age. On the other hand, employment opportunities did not keep pace with this increase in the aged population.”

This growing disparity between increased lifespans and decreased employment opportunities was problematic in Clague’s view because

if we fall short of our full employment goals and if we fail to provide adequate work opportunities to those older men and women who want to and are able to work…the increased span of enforced idleness in old age will place a heavy financial burden…on those in the labor

32 Senator Desmond had been the driving force behind the “New York Plan,” a program developed by state legislators and community service organizations that emphasized an “individualized community approach that recognizes the social and health as well as the economic aspects of aging.” The New York Plan, according to its creators, stood in contrast to the state-wide solution undertaken in California, which an internal New York State legislative report unfavorably described as searching for the “easy panacea of boosting old-age assistance, a process which threatens to bankrupt the state.” The New York Plan therefore sought to address a wider range of issues faced by older people, but to do so in a collaborative way that would not create an unsustainable financial burden on New York’s budget. See Howard A. Rusk, M.D., “Community Aid for Old Folk Helps Solve a Major Problem,” The New York Times, July 31, 1949. The New York Plan consisted of a ten-step program that included “smashing artificial age barriers that keep oldsters from employment,” and “extending vocational and medical rehabilitation so oldsters can resume work.” In fact, the thrust of the Plan emphasized returning as many older people to gainful employment, possibly as a way to keep the number of older people dependent upon public assistance in the state from growing too numerous.


34 Ibid., 2.
force who will be contributing to their support, either directly as individuals, or by increased levies on their current earnings.\(^3^5\)

In contrast to NAM’s insistence that the problems of older workers could best be addressed solely as an internal matter and on an individual basis by private employers, Clague instead concluded his statement to the Joint Legislative Committee by observing that the dilemma of older workers “will command the combined resources of the Federal and State and local governments, of labor and management, and of many community groups, if it is to be dealt with effectively.”\(^3^6\) Clague’s statement lent encouragement to the committee’s efforts to get legislation passed in New York State which would mandate the use of fair employment practices with regard to older and disabled workers. The prospects for the successful enactment of such legislation were likely better in New York State than they were at the national level, where the presence of a powerful conservative congressional coalition on Capitol Hill militated against the passage of progressive legislation intended to expand on the Wagner Act or the Fair Labor Standards Act.

In fact, New York State, California, and a host of other major industrial states had already begun by the late 1940s and early 1950s to address the issue of how to best provide for economic security in old age. Senator Desmond’s New York State Joint Legislative Committee on the Problems of the Aging was steadily producing reports, brochures, and other publications designed to help older New Yorkers find gainful employment, a step that few other states had yet taken.\(^3^7\) Perhaps more importantly, Desmond’s committee was already beginning the process of shepherding pioneering proposed legislation to protect the rights of older workers from discrimination into

\(^3^5\) Ibid., 3.
\(^3^6\) Ibid., 5.
\(^3^7\) See Warren Weaver, Jr., “State is Put First in Helping of Aged,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 13, 1950. In addition to New York, by 1950 the states of California, Illinois, and Michigan had taken formal steps to create new agencies or departments specifically designed to address the social and economic security of older people.
tangible law in New York State. Eventually, New York State would enact legislation prohibiting
discrimination on the basis of age in June 1958 by adding older workers (whom the law defined as
persons “between the ages of 45 and 65”) as a protected class of worker. New York thus joined a
small group of states like Massachusetts, Louisiana, and Colorado that had enacted such laws,
though in the latter two these laws had proven to be ineffective at serving their stated purpose
because they lacked enforcement provisions.

By contrast, New York’s statute created a process for older workers to file complaints with
the State Commission Against Discrimination (S.C.A.D.), and for state officials to then investigate
the veracity of those complaints. In the months following the enactment of New York’s age
discrimination legislation, hiring practices in the state showed a modest but appreciable change.
Prior to the law’s enactment, roughly ten percent of newspaper employment advertisements in New
York included explicit age requirements or prohibitions, whereas afterwards less than one percent
did. Hundreds of workers also filed complaints alleging either age discrimination in employer hiring
or retention practices with the S.C.A.D., though not all of these cases were resolved in their favor.
In order to deal with such claims without inflaming private employers, S.C.A.D. insisted upon a
policy of “direct contact” that emphasized “education and persuasion” rather than “prosecution and

38 For an example of one of the many publications put by the New York State Joint Legislative Committee on the
Problems of the Aging, see New York State Joint Legislative Committee, “Memo to Older Workers, re: How to get a
Job,” Albany, New York, November 1950. Available via the Online Archive of California at:
http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6pf/dsc/?id=01-1.3.9.5 (Accessed September 8, 2016). As the
“Memo to Older Workers” pamphlet cited an oversupply of workers for available jobs as well as the “old-fashioned
hiring habits on the part of employers.” (Ibid., 3). In 1950, when Desmond’s committee first began to debate new state
legislation designed to bar discrimination on the basis of age in hiring practices in New York State, its hearings in
Albany drew a crowd of “several hundred social workers and representatives of philanthropic organizations,” a telling
sign of the growing interest which New York’s social welfare community took in the proposed legislation. See “Age Job

discrimination legislation rested on the concerns of state legislators that attempts by other states to achieve lessened
discrimination on the basis of age through new laws had not proven to be particularly effective because employers had
simply evaded or ignored these laws. See “State Ban on Barring Jobs to Aged Put Off,” The New York Times, December
9, 1951.


punishment,” a strategy that ultimately yielded modest but measurable compliance.\textsuperscript{42} Dr. Elmer A. Carter, the chairman of S.C.A.D., summed up the commission’s approach by describing its tactics as an “initial educational period” that aimed less at dictating to private employers and instead sought to teach employers to set aside preconceived notions about the productivity of older workers.\textsuperscript{43} By building productive relationships with private employers, S.C.A.D., in conjunction with the New York State Employment Service, sought to build support for its long-term initiative to increase job opportunities for older workers, which would have the double benefit of reducing both age discrimination and poverty among older workers in New York.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{The Elderly Poor and the Rise of Community Services in New York City}

New York State’s pioneering efforts during the 1950s represented an important response to the crisis over economic security in old-age that had reemerged during the late 1940s. In the public sector, state and local officials tentatively explored new ways to assist older people who lacked access to Social Security or to private pensions. The situation they confronted would have been shockingly familiar to old-age pension reformers twenty years earlier. As part of a major five part series on the problems of aging Americans, the \textit{New York Times} sent reporter Edith Evans Asbury in February 1955 to visit the mental hospitals, private nursing homes, and other institutions sprinkled throughout New York City, which had become the final residence of thousands of elderly New Yorkers.\textsuperscript{45} As Asbury soberly noted in her articles, “most of the havens in which these men and women have found refuge for their declining years were not designed to handle their problems.”\textsuperscript{46}

The residents of these institutions, though, were not destitute paupers without any means of economic support. While many of them had some combination of Social Security, Old Age

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
Assistance, and private pensions ("all income groups are struck," the Times noted), they had still ended up in institutional care, in no small part because "the average, self-supporting, middle-income family...finds it impossible in New York City to solve the problem of long-term custodial care for a senile relative in a way commensurate with its pride and self-respect." As Asbury wrote, only "by reducing their own standard of living [could] some middle income families...manage to maintain a senile parent or grandparent...Usually, as things are now, the senile from the middle and lower income family eventually goes to a taxpayer-supported institution, despite his family's financial sacrifices and pride." The economic strains felt by many New York City families to support older relatives were felt elsewhere in the nation. As Michael Harrington would later write in The Other America, it is a fact that the problems of the aged are so great that families, probably the majority of them in the nation, cannot really deal with them...[d]uring the fifties...all costs on the Consumer Price Index went up by 12 per cent. But medical costs, that terrible staple of the aged, went up by 36 per cent, hospitalization rose by 65 per cent, and group hospitalization costs (Blue Cross premiums), were up by 83 per cent. These figures have clearly priced the care of the aged out of the budget of millions of American families."

Asbury’s series on the plight of New York’s elderly poor was just the latest piece of evidence that programs like Social Security that were designed to keep older people out of economic penury were becoming increasingly ineffective at performing that task. In the decade before the New York Times ran Asbury’s series, its reporters had covered in extensive detail the struggle by organized old age groups in California and Colorado to enact

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Harrington, The Other America, 118.
guaranteed pensions for the older residents of those states—effectively, to legislate the Townsend Plan into existence on a state-by-state basis.\footnote{See, for example, Gladwin Hill, “California Worry Rises on Pensions: $75 a Month at Age 63 Is Big Attraction to the Elderly from Other States,” \textit{The New York Times}, April 17, 1949. See also Lawrence E. Davies, “California Limits Utopia for Aged: In a Reversal of Form, Voters Decide to Drop Thousands of Pensioners from the Rolls,” \textit{The New York Times}, November 13, 1949.} As the \textit{Times} reported, California’s old-age pension had eliminated the traditional “support-by-relatives” stipulation which many states (including New York) insisted upon, and consequently had a far greater number of eligible applicants and recipients, with the pension’s cost amounting to approximately 17% of a $1 billion budget (1949 dollars) and rising in its first year alone.

Within a year of enacting this unusually generous old-age pension, California voters in a November 1949 special election largely rescinded its more liberal provisions, but not before roughly a third of its citizens over the age of 65 (approximately 250,000 people) had signed up for a pension (the pensions averaged out to $71 monthly in 1949 dollars). By contrast, less than ten percent of residents aged 65 years or older received pensions in New York and Pennsylvania; in both of those states, the pension averaged between $40 and $52 monthly in 1949 dollars, a figure that was considerably less generous than California. Colorado and Washington State, though, had the highest overall proportion of elderly citizens over the age of 65 receiving state old-age pensions at 47.71 and 38 percent, respectively.

As the \textit{Times} coverage of these state-level struggles over old-age pensions hinted, there had been a political re-awakening among the elderly that had galvanized them into action, a fact that local welfare officials and experts in New York City were also becoming aware of.\footnote{See, for example, Peter Kihss, “41% of Pensioners Are Found Unhappy: Inadequate Income and Desire to Work Are Chief Problems, Mayor’s Committee Hears,” \textit{The New York Times}, May 17, 1953. The New York City Mayor’s Advisory Committee for the Aged had been organized in late 1949 with funds donated by the Rockefeller Foundation, and had rapidly become a clearinghouse of information about the approximately 675,000 older people living in New York City, a figure which dwarfed the entire population of most American cities, and which represented the single largest geographical concentration of senior citizens in the entire country, exceeding even the Los Angeles-Long Beach, California region which had been the wellspring of the Townsend Movement.} In November
1945, the *New York Times* sponsored a broadcast radio forum in which Ollie Randall from the Community Service Society, Dr. Frederick Zeman of the private Home for Aged and Infirm Hebrews, and Lillian Poses, a regional Social Security representative, discussed the growing “needs of the aged.”\(^{53}\) In particular, the three speakers emphasized the demand by elderly people that there be “better housing facilities…more recreational facilities…and a new public attitude recognizing their individuality,” all of which were needs that were not being met by the Social Security system. Furthermore, these new demands suggested how many older Americans had begun to redefine the parameters of economic and social security programs beyond the principles of basic economic security that had guided the assumptions made by the architects of the original Social Security Act.\(^{54}\)

Increasingly, the *Times* warned in its coverage of state-level pension movements in western states like California and Colorado that elderly Americans were again becoming increasingly active in seeking to have their demands met by the political system.\(^{55}\) The ferocity of the fight in California between resurgent latter-day Townsend Movement-style old age advocacy groups was particularly alarming to the *New York Times* reporters stationed there, who could not help but wonder if the generational conflict in California was merely the opening act in a new, potentially much larger national struggle over old-age economic security, much as it had been during the Great Depression.\(^{56}\) In truth, though, while the Townsend Movement had largely ceased to be an effective


\(^{56}\) In a 1950 report, the U.S. Department of Labor found that approximately 8% of the population in both California and Colorado was over the age of 65. As the Labor Department report noted, though, “in general…the highest proportions of persons aged 65 and over are found in New England, in the Great Plains States, and on the West Coast,” while “in the Southern States, the proportion of aged persons tends to be relatively low.” The same report predicted that the proportion of workers aged 45 and over is “likely to increase significantly in future years.” See U.S. Department of Labor.
force in national politics, it had left a formidable legacy in many western states, where its organizers had successfully politicized many older Americans on the issue of old-age economic security.\textsuperscript{57} Even more troubling, evidence of discontent among older Americans was not merely a regional phenomenon confined to western states like California or Colorado: a 1953 poll funded by the Rockefeller Foundation of retired New York City teachers and city employees – many of whom already had publicly supported pensions – revealed broad dissatisfaction due to “inadequate income” and an inability to secure continued gainful employment.\textsuperscript{58}

While the western states roiled with the continuing fights over state-level pensions, private philanthropic foundations were also taking important steps to investigate the problems of the elderly. On May 29, 1951, the \textit{New York Times} reported that the Rockefeller Foundation had given a $25,000 seed grant to the New York City Mayor’s Advisory Committee for the Aged to fund research on facilities for the aged in New York.\textsuperscript{59} Raymond M. Hilliard, the executive director of the city’s welfare council, immediately appointed Louis Dublin, a vice president of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company to carry out the study, which Hilliard hoped would try to determine “what we can do best to prevent the debilities of old age…[and] how we can enrich the lives of those of our older people, particularly how we may remove from them the fear of old age, the fear of its

\textsuperscript{57} Gladwin Hill, “California Worry Rises on Pensions: $75 a Month at Age 63 is Big Attraction to the Elderly from Other States,” \textit{The New York Times}, April 17, 1949. In November 1948, California voters had narrowly approved an initiative to provide old-age pensions which offered qualified California residents $75 per month, provided they were 63 years of age or older and had resided in California for at least five years prior to the enactment of the pension. The old-age pension also removed any “support by relatives” stipulation and had an extremely generous personal property exemption that exempted jewelry and automobiles. According to the \textit{Times}, only Colorado offered a more generous old age pension. In November 1949 - just one year after California voters had approved a liberalized old-age pension – they opted to tighten the eligibility requirements for the state’s old age pension and thereby removed thousands of older people from California’s public relief rolls. See Lawrence E. Davies, “California Limits Utopia for Aged: In A Reversal of Form, Voters Decide to Drop Thousands of Pensioners from the Rolls,” \textit{The New York Times}, November 13, 1949.

\textsuperscript{58} Peter Kihss, “41% of Pensioners Are Found Unhappy,” \textit{The New York Times}, March 17, 1953.

poverty and its sickness and its uselessness and humiliation and its desolation.” 60 Hilliard’s ruminations had real meaning in New York, which in 1951 counted approximately eleven percent of its elderly population on public assistance rolls.61 Earlier in the year, Hilliard, in a speech before the Economic Club of Detroit, had warned that “unless the root causes were attacked the United States would face ‘an almost inevitable straight-line increase in the volume of dependency.”62 As Hilliard noted, “we cannot prevent people from reaching old age, but we can prevent them from reaching it in a condition of dependency.”63

Hilliard’s campaign throughout 1951 suggested the inadequacy of the existing framework of public and private security provision, at least for local welfare officials who had to devise creative solutions to fill the gap between Social Security and the rapidly increasing numbers of impoverished elderly people with limited options. If the demographic projections put out by the 1950 U.S. Census were correct – as the New York Times noted, persons over 65 in New York constituted 7.3 per cent of the city’s population in 1950, but had made up just 2.8 percent in 1900 – then the city would very likely soon face the unwelcome fact of growing old-age dependency on public assistance, a development no one particularly welcomed.64

60 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 “Rockefeller Fund Gives to Help Aged,” The New York Times, May 29, 1951. See also U.S. Department of Labor, Fact Book on the Employment Problems of Older Workers, August 13-15, 1950, Washington, D.C., which predicted that “by 1980…there will be over 22 million persons past 65…underlying these changes in the age structure of the population have been the long-term decline in the birth rate, the cessation of large-scale immigration, and the increases in longevity resulting from advances in living standards.” Available at California and West Coast Labor and Industrial Relations, selected publications, IRLE-LB01. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library, University of California, Berkeley.
Even in 1951, though, a city as prosperous as New York, like other local municipalities, could only do so much for its elderly residents. The Truman administration’s 1950 National Conference on the Aging had recognized this reality in its final recommendations, observing that “while each local community should assume as much responsibility as possible and ‘not pass the buck,’ many cannot solve the problem alone. Thus planning for the aged should be on a State-wide basis, with many communities working together.” The emerging partnership between the Mayor’s Advisory Council and the Rockefeller Foundation thus represented a pioneering model which could demonstrate that government and philanthropy could productively partner together to solve important social problems. By developing programs in New York City which could try to improve the living conditions of the city’s impoverished elderly residents, Hilliard and other city welfare officials hoped to offer an attractive alternative solution to them that promised to re-integrate them back into the community as respected members rather than pitied elders, and that would also have the effect of diminishing the appeal of newly re-energized old-age pension advocacy groups.

In the months which followed the Rockefeller Foundation’s grant, new facilities dedicated to assisting the lives of older New Yorkers began to appear throughout the city. As he opened up one recreational center in Harlem, New York Mayor Vincent Impellitteri stated that “it is a tragedy of our time…that while we have learned how to prolong life, we have not learned how to make the

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California, Berkeley. Accessed via the Online Archive of California at http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6pf/dsc/#e01-1.3.9.5 (Accessed September 15, 2016). As it turned out, the Department of Labor’s projected population was accurate, though a bit conservative in its estimate. There were 25.5 million people over the age of 65 in 1980 in the United States. See U.S. Census Bureau, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century* by Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, November 2002, pg. 60, Figure 2-6, Population Age 65 and Over: 1900 to 2000. Available at: https://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf (March 8, 2017).


66 The Mayor’s Advisory Council was originally appointed in October 1949 by Mayor O’Dwyer. Lucy Freeman, “City Group to Aid ‘Senior Citizens’” *The New York Times*, October 24, 1949.

later years of life happier and more livable. We may, however, be learning here today how we can more amply meet our responsibilities to our senior citizens.” 68 Impellitteri’s remarks neatly encapsulated how public officials and social welfare experts had decided to try and resolve the issue of old-age economic insecurity at the local level. Implicitly conceding that the wartime and immediate postwar hopes for Social Security’s expansion into a truly comprehensive program were unlikely to be achieved anytime soon, municipalities like New York City and major private philanthropies like the Rockefeller Foundation had decided to work in partnership in order to devise and provide alternative options which “would make the later years of life happier and more livable.” 69

The newly opened recreational and vocational centers were soon joined by other city-wide initiatives. 70 A citywide orchestra consisting of elderly musicians was formed; New York’s mayors and governors quickly got into the habit of proclaiming city and state-wide “Senior Citizen” month, Times Square was renamed for a day as “Senior Citizens Square,” and perhaps most importantly, delayed legislation began to be drafted in Albany which attempted to give real teeth to efforts to prevent age discrimination in New York State. 71 As Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her May 15, 1952

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 New York City’s Welfare Department took credit for inventing the concept of senior centers. According to Harry Levine, a New York City Welfare Department official, city officials conceived of senior centers as similar to daycare centers for children of broken homes, because “the homes of these older persons have been broken” by loss of employment, lessened contact with adult children and other family members, and growing social isolation. See Howard A. Rusk, M.D., “Self-Rule of the Aging: A Report on the ‘Collective Security’ That Marks East Harlem Day Center,” The New York Times, December 19, 1954.
“My Day” column, “I think this work for our really senior citizens is going to succeed and I think we will learn even to humanize some of our laws. Social Security is not always sufficient for an older person to live on.”

Twice more in future years, Eleanor Roosevelt would highlight New York State’s “Senior Citizens Month” in her column, urging her older readers in her May 10, 1955 column to write to the New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Problems of the Aged to get copies of the committee’s recently published “bill of rights and responsibilities for senior citizens.” As Roosevelt observed in her column, “people are living longer than their ancestors lived and it is a necessity for them to live usefully and happily even if they have to change their type of occupation at a given retirement age…they should not be made to ‘retreat from life.’ They should be used for the good of the community.”

Eleanor Roosevelt’s insistence on the vitality of older people probably came in part from her own life experience – she had, after all, remained a vital force in American politics despite her own age (she was 66 years old in 1950) – but her columns also neatly captured both changing popular and academic understandings of old age in the 1950s. In June 1951, for example, at a major academic conference held at Northwestern University, University of Chicago sociologist Philip M. Hauser lamented the effects of urbanization and industrialization on the American family, which he argued had led to a shift from a “large family system” in which older people had clearly defined roles as respected elders to a “small family” model in which older people lacked any clearly defined social role to play. As Hauser observed, “the modern American family is not what it used to be…the family has long since lost many of its various historic functions or has shared them with

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74 “Social Implications of An Aging Population,” Philip M. Hauser, Professor of Sociology, Northwestern University Centennial Conference, June 7, 1951, pg. 5, Philip M. Hauser Papers, Box 48, folder 10, University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center, Chicago, Illinois.
new, specialized, urban institutions.” In Hauser’s view, the shift for many families from a rural to urban living pattern had led to “considerable strain” on “the historic bonds of solidarity, sentiment, and affection” which had marked many rural communities. Urban living patterns had introduced “new dangers and new forms of insecurity” for older Americans, and “these changing forms of hazards and insecurity coupled with the decreasing size of family vitally affect the position of older persons,” and in his view, “so attenuated have the protective functions of the contemporary urban family become that it often cannot – even when it wishes to do so – provide security to its aging dependent members.”

In essence, Hauser argued that the declining ability of the American family to supply its oldest members with their traditional roles had exacerbated the types of insecurity that beset many older Americans. Summing up his argument, Hauser stated that “although problems of aging are by no means restricted to the economic sphere, there can be little doubt that the maintenance of means is perhaps the basic and critical problem of old age.”


76 “Social Implications of an Aging Population,” Philip M. Hauser, Professor of Sociology, Northwestern University Centennial Conference, June 7, 1951, pg. 7, Philip M. Hauser Papers, Box 37, Folder 11, University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center, Chicago, Illinois.

77 Hauser’s arguments about the unfavorable changes in the American labor for older workers was supported by reports published by the U.S. Department of Labor; see Ewan Clague, “Labor Force Trends in the United States,” U.S. Department of Labor, Paper Presented Before the Second International Gerontological Congress, St. Louis, Missouri, September 10, 1951. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library, University of California, Berkeley. Accessed via the Online Archive of California at http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/28722/bk0003z8h4p/?brand=oac4 (Accessed October 5, 2016). In particular, the U.S. Department of Labor found that “there [had] been a sharp decline in labor force activity among older men, which is most significant for men over 65. The proportion of these men in the labor force declined from 63 percent in 1900 to slightly under 42 percent in 1950,” a decline which Clague attributed to the declining importance of agriculture and the more rapid obsolescence of skills by advances in industrial technology (Ibid., 2-4).

78 “Social Implications of An Aging Population,” Philip M. Hauser, Professor of Sociology, Northwestern University Centennial Conference, June 7, 1951, pg. 9, Philip M. Hauser Papers, Box 37, Folder 11, University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center, Chicago, Illinois.
expression a year earlier at the 1950 National Conference on Aging, and increasingly they began to influence policymakers, newspaper columnists, and social welfare experts.  

Following from these premises, in Hauser’s view, the “expanding services of the government directed at meeting the needs and dealing with the problems of old age” could be “regarded as social inventions designed to deal with the problems of aging no longer being adequately met by our inherited culture and social institutions.” While conceding that the United States had a long political tradition of limited government, Hauser ultimately argued that

the wide range and the complexity of the problems of personal adjustment in old age in contemporary life, the changing role and uncertain economic position of the older person in our urban industrial society, together with the rapidly increasing number and proportion of older persons in our urban industrial society, together with the rapidly increasing number and proportion of older persons in our population seem definitely to call for concerted action of individuals and of private and public agencies to deal with the problems of old age and to facilitate personal adjustment.

While condemning the efforts of the federal government to relieve old-age economic insecurity as hitherto “a combination of musty inherited social institutions and patch work improvisation under pressures of severe depression and great political unrest,” Hauser admitted that “from a practical standpoint it is probably desirable to improve the programs we already have – to work on them as a point of departure rather than to start in new directions, however sound, de novo.” Instead of hoping for the federal government to solve the problem of economic insecurity, Hauser expressed his hope that state and local governments would “make a contribution to the solution of economic

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80 Ibid., 14.
81 Ibid., 19.
82 Ibid., 26. Underlining in original.
problems of old age.” In sum, a comprehensive approach was necessary to solve the economic and social problems associated with older people; only in this way could, as Hauser poignantly put it, American society “add life to years” rather than simply add years to life.

Hauser’s speech at the conference was just one marker of an evolving consensus about the role the federal, state, and local governments should play in shoring up the social and economic status of older Americans, given that the traditional non-governmental institutions of family life, organized religion, and private-sector employment were proving to be increasingly inadequate. That consensus was powered both by changing ideas in academia, but also by the rising costs associated with state-subsidized support of the elderly. For example, in late December 1949, the *New York Times* had reported that the total annual cost sustained by the federal, state, and local governments to provide public relief for impoverished elderly people had surpassed $250 million, a figure which was nine times greater than it had been a decade earlier. Despite this tremendous outlay of funds, though, 1 in 4 elderly people remained mired in poverty, and the costs of providing relief showed no signs of slowing down as the number of older people continued to steadily increase.

**Strengthening Social Security**

This tremendous expenditure of public funds had led, as the *Times* reported, to “virtually complete agreement among Democrats and Republicans, federal and state officials, and industry and labor that the only effective antidote to the handout philosophy in care for the aged lies in measures to buttress the old-age insurance system by stepping up the benefits and extending coverage to millions not now protected.” After years of being subject to bitterly partisan fights, Social Security’s old-age insurance provisions rather than its old age assistance provisions now enjoyed the limelight as the favored solution to the resurgent issue of old-age economic insecurity. Additionally,

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83 Ibid., 26.
85 Ibid.
there were mounting concerns made by some social welfare experts that some states were abusing the Social Security old age assistance program’s cost-sharing feature in order to support their elderly citizens. For example, in Louisiana, roughly 82 out of every 100 older people in the state were recipients of benefits provided by Social Security’s old-age assistance program. That figure had roughly doubled in the four years in between the end of World War II and 1949. Moreover, because the Social Security’s old age assistance program in Louisiana was subsidized with federal funds, meant that Louisiana was effectively receiving a generous discount on the costs of supporting its elderly population at the expense of other states that had far more robust participation by their older residents in Social Security’s old age insurance system, which did not receive similar federal subsidies. Several states – including Washington State, Colorado, and California – were already strongly signaling that this arrangement was not financially tenable for the long term, and were beginning to invoke the specter of state bankruptcy should Social Security’s old-age assistance program continue to outpace its old-age insurance provisions.

Making common cause with the uneasy state officials were many of the nation’s private insurers. While they had been opposed or indifferent to Social Security when it had first been enacted in 1935, increasingly private insurers worried that Social Security’s old age assistance program might create a de facto Townsendite-like sense of personal entitlement on the part of the nation’s older citizens to guaranteed benefits, regardless of how those benefits were actually funded. In a November 1949 speech before the Ohio Chamber of Commerce, Reinhard A. Hohaus, the chief actuary for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, warned that “the availability of additional Federal funds for relief would tend to encourage the handout approach to pensions and negate the benefits to be derived from strengthening the insurance program,” and suggested that more states

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86 Ibid. It is unclear how much of Louisiana’s elderly African-American population received benefits from Social Security’s old-age assistance program.
might be tempted to follow Louisiana’s example and redesign their old-age assistance programs so as to maximize the amount of federal appropriations they could receive.87

The fiscal fears that both Hohaus and the coterie of state officials had publicly worried about had their origins in the work of the 1948 Social Security Advisory Council, which had assembled a broad spectrum of academic, labor, and insurance officials to re-evaluate and examine Social Security’s increasingly untenable financial condition. After a series of in-depth investigations, the Advisory Council had found that Social Security’s social insurance model was being undercut and was ultimately in danger of being swept away by its public assistance provisions. Specifically, the Council found three major deficiencies in Social Security: “inadequate coverage” of American workers; “unduly restrictive eligibility requirements for older workers” which resulted in “only about 20 percent of those aged 65 or over [as] either insured or receiving benefits under the program”; and finally “inadequate benefits” which were insufficient to prevent retirees from falling below the official poverty line.88

In order to remedy these problems, the Advisory Council had recommended the inclusion of more categories of workers, including the self-employed, farm and household workers and expanding the eligibility requirements of Social Security’s old-age insurance program, along with an increase in the benefits paid by its old-age insurance rather than its old-age assistance program.89

In making these recommendations, the Advisory Council hoped to strengthen Social Security’s old-age insurance program and to weaken its old-age assistance program, with the ultimate goal of ensuring more even economic protection for older people throughout the United States that would

87 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
be less subject to the vagaries of state-by-state assistance. As the Council frankly admitted in its report,

the economic and legislative developments of the past year have served effectively to confirm the Social Security Administration in its belief that the present limited system of social security, comprising the various programs operating under the Social Security Act and under other separate legislative measures, is an inadequate and inequitable way of providing the basic essentials of economic and social security for the Nation’s gainfully employed persons and their families.90

The changes proposed by the Council would therefore have the effect of putting Social Security onto a more secure financial footing, given that it would be taking in more revenue from the payroll taxes levied on newly included groups of workers.

It was becoming increasingly clear that the old-age assistance aspect of Social Security had metastasized into a program that dwarfed Social Security’s old-age insurance provisions and which threatened to award the Townsend Movement a posthumous victory. To rectify the situation and place Social Security back on a firmer footing, the Truman administration, in conjunction with the CIO’s unions, sought passage of a series of legislative amendments in 1950 to the Social Security Act in order to translate the 1948 Social Security Advisory Council’s recommendations into law, even though those amendments largely steered clear of the question raised by Cohen about how to “provide genuinely productive jobs” for older people.91 After a fierce political battle, the administration and the CIO succeeded in their quest; by August 1950, President Truman had signed the Social Security amendments into law.

90 Ibid.
Despite the lack of provision for “genuinely productive jobs” for older people, the Social Security amendments enacted in 1950 began the process of tipping the balance within Social Security towards old-age insurance and away from old-age assistance. By January 1952, the number of people receiving old age insurance exceeded the number receiving old age assistance, and likewise the “total amount of insurance payments to aged persons exceeded the amount of old-age assistance payments.” Even as they rejoiced in the expanded protections afforded to Social Security, some astute New Deal liberals could not ignore the fact that the Social Security system remained far from universal in its scope or sufficient in its benefits to end the scourge of old-age economic insecurity. As social welfare expert and New Dealer Wilbur Cohen observed in January 1952, “there are still many aged persons with inadequate incomes, many pressing problems with respect to income for the aged still unsolved or awaiting consideration, and a need for much more information on the economic status of the aged.”

State Actions to Bolster Economic Security in Old Age

Whilst the fight over Social Security benefits continued to play out in Washington, evidence of the increasingly muscular response on the part of state and local officials in New York and elsewhere to provide more firm guarantees of economic security in old age to their elderly constituents. In 1955, while speaking at a three day conference on the problems of the aging, New York Governor Averell Harriman expressed his hope that New York State’s government could act

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93 Ibid.
94 In neighboring New Jersey, Governor Robert B. Meyner also took an active interest in the problems of the aging and but unlike Harriman publicly suggested that those problems be “attacked by [private] organizations at the local level” rather than by the elected officials at the state level. See “Aid to Elderly Urged: Gov. Meyner Puts Problem to Local Organizations,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 1957.
as “a catalyst in the process of galvanizing a state-wide onslaught against the economic, physical, emotional and spiritual problems of the aging.”

Sensing that the time was right to propose new legislation, in January 1956 New York State Senator Thomas C. Desmond announced that he would propose a series of forty bills “to help prevent poverty among the aged.” His motivation was simple. As he declared in an interview with the *New York Times*, “it is not enough to feed and house the indigent aged...Society’s basic problem is to prevent indigency.” Alongside long-sought goals like extension of unemployment insurance benefits, Desmond proposed to “withhold public contracts from companies that discriminate against workers of 40 or more in hiring practices” and to “encourage ‘portable’ pension plans under which a worker retains accrued benefits when changing jobs.” In November 1956, the New York State Division of Housing directed that “at least 5 percent of apartments in state-aided projects be designed and reserved for aged persons,” in order to meet the growing demand for suitable housing for the state’s elderly population, most of whom could not afford “the rents that private builders find they must charge.” Taken as a whole, these proposals and initiatives represented an unprecedented expansion of New York State’s role in ensuring the well-being of its older citizens; indeed, with the possible exceptions of California or Colorado, no state had done more on behalf of its elderly residents.

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98 Ibid.
100 Since 1933, in fact, the New York City Housing Authority had provided small apartments suitable for older persons in public housing, including housing projects in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and Fort Greene, Brooklyn. According to the *New
Unlike California or Colorado, though, New York State’s role in providing extensive social services to its senior citizens was a more recent development. Between the end of World War II and the 1955, New York State’s spending on pensions, welfare, and institutional care for the aged increased by almost five times. Governor Harriman’s administration expected spending to continue to rise at a similar rate for the duration of the 1950s and well into the 1960s; as one report noted, “in 1945 payments by government agencies to all persons in New York 65 and over plus the public expense of maintaining the aged in hospitals totaled $170,000,000” whereas in 1955 “the comparable figure was $833,000,000.” The growing concerns about the rising number of elderly people found resonance throughout New York’s busy private welfare establishment. In February 1957, B’nai B’rith, a major American Jewish organization, publicly declared that “increasing problems confronting the aged required ‘concerted effort’ on local levels.” Citing what it termed “principal danger spots for senior citizens,” such as “discrimination in employment…the concentration of older persons in dense urban areas…insufficient medical care for the aged, and a decline in the standard of living for the aged,” Philip M. Klutznick, the president of B’nai B’rith, urged “cooperative action” by federal and local officials to “ameliorate the threats to our aged and aging population.”

These efforts indicated that much of the impetus for resolving the issue of how best to provide economic security for older people had begun to return to the state and local levels of government, usually in conjunction with the efforts of private welfare and philanthropic organizations. In essence, while the effects of the Great Depression had bankrupted or otherwise

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102 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
driven many private charities either out of existence or very nearly to the brink, the continuing stalemate at the federal level over Social Security and other unfinished items from the New Deal wish list had created a vacuum that needed to be addressed at the local and state levels.

Put somewhat differently, the mere fact that the federal government took only halting action on the issue of economic security in old age did not extinguish it as an issue. The prospect of indigent or formerly middle-class elderly people organizing and demanding more direct government action on their behalf was not a remote one. On October 29, 1955, Albert J. Abrams, the director of the New York State Legislative Committee on Problems of the Aging addressed the Gerontological Society of America’s annual meeting in Baltimore, Maryland. In his remarks, Abrams asserted that “the shadow of Mr. [Francis] Townsend still hovers over Congress…his demonstration of the political potentials of the aged, coming within only a few scanty votes of winning in the House of Representatives, still manifests itself on the deliberations of the lawmakers.”

The Townsend Movement was still taken sufficiently seriously in 1957 that it could persuade Congressman John A. Blatnik (D-MN) to reintroduce the Townsend bill as a major modification of the Social Security Act, and for Blatnik’s home-state colleague Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) to praise the bill on the Senate floor in 1958. The Eisenhower administration kept close watch on the Townsend Movement as well, and sought to avoid any open conflict with it. Eisenhower personally met with Dr. Townsend in 1958, which suggests that the Townsend

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105 Edith Evans Asbury. “Aid to Aged is Set as Elections Aim,” The New York Times, October 30, 1955. Abrams had previously served as the Chairman of the Employment, Employability, and Rehabilitation Section of the 1950 National Conference on Aging, and was a well-known figure in state government circles on aging policy.
106 Ibid.
107 “Senator Says Nation Needs Buying Power of Old Folks,” Townsend National Weekly, May 31, 1958, Box 708, OF 156-C Social Security 1959-60 folder, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), 1953-61, DDEL. The Eisenhower administration kept close watch on the Townsend Movement and sought to avoid any open conflict with it. Eisenhower met with Townsend in 1958, which suggests that the Townsend Movement was not nearly as irrelevant as students have assumed it had become after the 1930s. See Earle D. Chesney, “Memo for the files,” June 9, 1958, Box 708, OF 156-C Social Security 1959-60 folder, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), 1953-61, DDEL.
Movement might not have been as irrelevant as some students have assumed it had become after the 1930s. The continuing appeal of the Townsend Movement was a stark reflection of the fact that as late as November 1953, a significant proportion of the nation’s population over the age of 65 was still receiving some form of publicly funded old-age financial assistance, with the highest state-by-state percentages still concentrated in southern and western states. Additionally, nearly sixty percent of that same population group remained ineligible for payments under the terms and conditions of Social Security’s OASI social insurance provisions, with ineligibility particularly highest among older women.

The Eisenhower Administration and the Search for Old-Age Economic Security

Dwight D. Eisenhower’s newly inaugurated administration in January 1953 thereby confronted a situation in which the future direction of old-age economic security in the United States remained in limbo. On the one hand, Eisenhower’s disdain for the New Deal’s emphasis on collective security through governmental action was particularly pointed. In 1949, long before he had begun to campaign for the presidency, Eisenhower had intertemporately remarked that “if all that Americans want is security, they can go to prison. They’ll have enough to eat, a bed and a roof over their heads. But if an American wants to preserve his dignity and his equality as a human being, he must not bow his neck to any dictatorial government.”

Eisenhower later came to regret those words once in office, but his personal disapproval of the New Deal’s commitment to collective economic security through the use of government power

109 Ibid. As Suzanne Mettler observes, a study conducted by the Social Security Board in 1941 and 1942 of OASI beneficiaries in Philadelphia and St. Louis revealed that “men constituted 84 percent of all primary beneficiaries of OASI in Philadelphia and 86 percent in St. Louis…Under OAA, by contrast, only 45 percent of the Philadelphia beneficiaries and 43 percent of those in St. Louis were men. Less than 5 percent of the primary beneficiaries of OASI were black, but African-Americans were approximately one-quarter of OAA beneficiaries. See Suzanne Mettler, Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 111-112.
was hardly a secret. His 1949 remarks did little to assuage concerns about what an Eisenhower administration might do to Social Security once in office. The Republican rank-and-file became sufficiently alarmed that an openly antagonistic stance might cost Eisenhower the election. In a confidential memo from Major Corliss C. Moseley, a senior executive at the Curtiss-Wright corporation in Glendale, California to Reuben H. Fleet, an important San Diego businessman, and subsequently passed along to Eisenhower’s Chief of Staff Sherman Adams by Senator William Knowland (R-CA), Moseley confided that

[a] careful and confidential study of our approximately 5,000 employees, conducted during the last few months, indicates conclusively that General Eisenhower has NOT come forth with a firm position and stand on what he is going to do for the “WORKING MAN.” Practically every employee of ours, who is opposed to Eisenhower, states that “The Democrats gave us social security; I need it for my old age,” “General Eisenhower has said nothing about it or the working man,” and “If I vote for him we may lose it.”

Moseley urged Eisenhower to speak more frequently about Social Security, advice which Eisenhower’s campaign took to heart. While on the campaign trail throughout October 1952, Eisenhower spoke often about Social Security and in much calmer, softer tones. As candidate Eisenhower remarked in Schenectady, New York on October 23, 1952: “we believe in expanded

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110 Dwight D. Eisenhower, president of Columbia University, speech to luncheon clubs, Galveston, Texas, December 8, 1949. See The New York Times, December 9, 1949, p. 23. William Mitchell, an Eisenhower administration official, later claimed that “I never felt that Eisenhower had the feel for the great human problems of the country…Maybe I’m biased because he never thought much of Social Security, and I think he would have been extremely happy if we’d never had a Social Security Act – that is, as a philosophical idea…He never developed a familiarity with it…he never seemed to understand it. In some of his press conferences, he came out with the damndest conflicting statements, things that simply could not be reconciled, and he was always getting mixed up between social insurance and public assistance…He had the businessman’s point of view about “do-gooders,” and because of that, I never felt that he was sympathetic, although he was politically forced into acceptance. And part of his lack of sympathy was his failure intellectually to appreciate the philosophical and sociological aspects of that and other human relations problems…I think he slowed down the development of Social Security by moving ahead only as he was forced to move by the weight of public opinion, and by the logic and pressures that he got from both within and without his administration.” See the Reminiscences of William Mitchell, January 11, 1968, on pages 29-31 in the Columbia University Oral History Research Office Collection, New York, NY.

111 Corliss C. Moseley to Reuben H. Fleet, October 16, 1952, Box 707, OF 156-B Community Chest 1959-60 folder, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), 1953-61, DDEL. Italics and underlining in the original text.
and improved social security. We believe in better security for our aged, to make certain that they
do not have fears that come about through things over which they have no control.”

Once elected, though, some of Eisenhower’s supporters within and without the Republican
Party expected him to take decisive action against Social Security, though others remained more
circumspect in their attitude. In October 1953, Edward F. Hutton of the stock brokerage firm E.F.
Hutton & Company wrote to Eisenhower urging him to consider drastically revamping Social
Security as a voluntary system. Eisenhower candidly responded in a confidential letter that

I have had an analysis made of our existing system – and the analysts
were among the most hard-headed, conservative individuals that I
know of. In general the conclusions are about as follows: We have
had a compulsory system since 1935. We must keep it on that basis or
else abandon it entirely…if we should put Social Security on a
voluntary basis, we would be in competition with every life insurance
company in the United States…it would appear logical to build upon
the system that has been in effect for almost twenty years rather than
embark upon the radical course of turning it completely upside down
and running the very real danger that we would end up with no system
at all.113

Behind closed doors, though, Eisenhower revealed a certain amount of open-mindedness on the
issue of Social Security. During a November 1953 Cabinet meeting, as HEW Secretary Oveta Culp
Hobby outlined her department’s proposals to strengthen OASI (Social Security’s old age insurance
program) in order to reduce and eventually eliminate Federal grants for Social Security’s old age
assistance program (OAA), Eisenhower wondered out loud about the relative merits of the
Townsend Plan, only to be firmly dissuaded from it by Secretary Hobby and other assembled
Cabinet members.114

112 “Campaign Statements on Old Age and Survivors Benefits,” June 29, 1953, Box 707 OF 156-C Social Security 1953,
Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), 1953-61, Official File, DDEL. See also
113 Dwight D. Eisenhower to Edward F. Hutton, October 7, 1953, File 156-C, Central Files, Box 848, DDEL.
114 Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, November 20, 1953, Cabinet Meeting of November 20, 1953 file, Eisenhower, Dwight
D.: Papers as President of the United States, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Cabinet Series, Box 2, pgs. 1-2, DDEL.
That Eisenhower and his Cabinet were even still discussing the Townsend Plan suggested just how deep an imprint the Townsend Movement had left on national politics as well as the continuing potential relevance of its proposed old-age pension program. In December 1952, after Eisenhower had been elected but before he had taken office, the New York Times reported on the continuing inadequacy of Social Security to keep its recipients above the poverty line.\textsuperscript{115} The next month, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce surprisingly added its voice to a rising chorus of supporters for Social Security expansion, it planned to do so by increasing payroll taxes on employees and largely ending Social Security’s old age assistance program.\textsuperscript{116} The Chamber’s proposal drew immediate fire from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.), which agreed that Social Security needed improvements but did not concur with the Chamber’s method for doing so.\textsuperscript{117} At stake in the fight was approximately $1.5 billion in public spending monies as well as the existing relationship under Social Security whereby individual states rather than the federal government determined the criteria for old age assistance eligibility.\textsuperscript{118}

Refusing to remain on the sidelines, Professor Edwin Witte, the chairman of the original Committee on Economic Security which Franklin Roosevelt had convened to forge the Social Security Act twenty years earlier, lambasted the Chamber of Commerce for proposing “a baby Townsend Plan” under which “the Santa is not the Government, but the employers and employees who contribute to O.A.S.I.”\textsuperscript{119} Refusing to surrender the fight over Social Security, Representative

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\textsuperscript{117} “Social Security Plan of U.S. Chamber Hit,” The New York Times, February 13, 1953. The fight over Social Security and other forms of public old-age assistance was not an abstract one for many unions, who increasingly had a deepening vested stake in ensuring that the public welfare system continued to function properly. In September 1953, for example, the United Mine Workers’ two largest expenditures were for pensions and medical care, which together consumed $114 million out of a total expenditure budget of $139 billion (or roughly 82% of all expenditures that year). For reference, total receipts for the year stood at $131 billion, so the UMW was obliged to withdraw funds from its savings in order to bridge the fiscal shortfall. See “Mine Pension Fund Spends $138 Million,” The New York Times, September 3, 1953.
\textsuperscript{118} “$1,500,000,000 Aid to Aged in a Year,” The New York Times, March 15, 1953.
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Carl T. Curtis (R-NE) responded by declaring at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Social Work that the program was “a tangle of legalistic snarls and contradictions” and that “searching inquiry into [it] was needed.”\textsuperscript{120} Albert J. Abrams, the director of New York State’s Joint Legislative Committee on the Problems of the Aging, joined the fray soon thereafter, and condemned the Chamber of Commerce’s proposals as ultimately more detrimental to the long-term viability of Social Security rather than beneficial.\textsuperscript{121}

The fight over old age assistance was not confined to national politics either. California’s elderly citizens continued to be the recipients of state expenditures which were “greater than the combined total of old age security payments made by New York and Pennsylvania,” both of which were states that were comparable in population size; only rapid and sustained influx of younger people into California kept state old age pension expenditures at a fiscally sustainable rate.\textsuperscript{122} In New York, Welfare Commissioner Henry L. McCarthy declared at a conference of public and private welfare officials that rampant alcoholism and the rising number of elderly people were the two biggest problems facing the city’s welfare administration, an argument that brought together much of the attendees in agreement.\textsuperscript{123}

McCarthy’s relatively placid assessment was upstaged, though, by the Rev. Milton A. Galamison, Minister of Siloam Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, who condemned the lackadaisical attitude of religious officials in the city towards the problems of the elderly, and acidly observed that “it is easier to interest churches in a problem at the North Pole than one in New York City.”\textsuperscript{124} Mincing no words, Galamison declaimed that “Puerto Ricans, delinquents, the aged, parolees, die on their [churches’] very doorstep for lack of their help…the institutionalized church needs to be

\textsuperscript{121} Murray Illson, ‘‘Phony’ Aims Noted on Social Security,” \textit{The New York Times}, November 12, 1953.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
reminded that charity, if it is to be effective, begins at home.”125 Letter writers to the Times groused over the alleged ill-treatment of old people, with one letter writer demanding that “old people must organize to help themselves…the only effective organization would be a political organization…an adequately organized ‘Old People’s Political party’ would soon stop the uncivilized practice of shutting industry’s doors to the employment of healthy and capable old people.”126

It was clear in 1953 that neither major political party wanted a return of the Townsend Movement or of any nascent “Old People’s Political party” to once again emerge. Congressional Republicans, in particular, had been watching the largely negative reaction to the Chamber of Commerce’s proposed plan and had surmised that it would be the wiser course of action not to upset voters in the upcoming midterm elections in 1954. They eventually won administration support for expansion of Social Security, although their embrace of Social Security came at the price of sowing seeds of division within their own ranks.127

The Eisenhower Administration’s Struggle for a Coordinated Response

In truth, though, the Eisenhower administration was beset by differing factions fighting over how to best handle the issue of old age security, which in turn reflected divisions among different organizations and individuals advocating on behalf of the elderly. After completing a study of existing federal initiatives on behalf of the elderly, Assistant Secretary of the newly-formed Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Roswell Perkins found their range to be striking; he later recalled that it also made coordination of such efforts next to impossible. To counter this tendency towards fragmentation of services and responsibilities, Perkins later successfully pushed for the creation of a Federal Council on Aging. The President eventually authorized it in 1956 in the

125 Ibid.
hope that it would successfully mediate among the various executive branch agencies that seemed far more interested in jealously guarding their respective turf.\textsuperscript{128}

The move to create a Federal Council on Aging revealed some measure of shrewdness on the part of Perkins and other like-minded administration officials. As Perkins conceded, his desire to produce a more coordinated approach to the problem of older Americans was motivated partly by political concerns. He later recalled that “I tried to beef up the Department [of Health, Education, and Welfare]’s focus on older people because of this very feeling that we were not giving enough public highlighting to both what was being done and what needed to be done” – but there were other considerations as well.\textsuperscript{129} Perkins, like other Department of Health, Education, and Welfare officials, was still mindful of the political tumultuousness of the Townsend Movement during the 1930s, and feared that inadequate federal efforts to address the needs of older Americans might spark a revival of Townsendism:

The startling vehemence of the Townsend movement and other movements demonstrated to anyone who gave it any reflection at all the fact that this was dynamite. So I certainly did not minimize in my own mind the extent to which, given what I would call improper or wrong leadership, the problem of the aged could get completely out of hand and could be demagogued to death.

Fearful of the return of political demagoguery, Perkins and his like-minded cohorts in the Eisenhower administration instead wanted

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\textit{to see to it that the Department’s approach to the aged was soundly based and soundly articulated; and by that I mean not separating the aged out from other population groups but to accept the fact that scientific aging begins with birth... and to do everything possible to get the problem of the aging reviewed dispassionately as a continuing phenomenon throughout life rather than to let the demagogues take}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{129} Oral History interview with Roswell Perkins (April 2, 1966), Social Security Administration Project, pg. 71 Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.
over and segregate the problems of older people from those of the rest of society [sic].

Perkins, along with other moderate Republicans ensconced in key policy positions throughout the Eisenhower administration, therefore came to embrace the expansion of Social Security as the decidedly lesser of two evils, at least compared to the return of the Townsend Movement.

Previously, in September 1954, Eisenhower had signed amendments to the Social Security Act, which raised benefit payments and expanded eligibility for Social Security to 10,000,000 additional workers. Speaking before an annual meeting of the New York State Welfare Conference, Perkins conceded that “much must still be done to strengthen the social security system,” but contended that “we have now completed the laying of an essentially solid foundation.” Instead of focusing on Social Security reform, Perkins urged the assembled delegates to devote more attention to the aging of the U.S. population, claiming that it “represents one of the great social welfare challenges of our times…the principal problem in dealing with the aged is to change the concept that aging is a problem for society to the concept that old age is a period of great value to society.”

Perkins did not elaborate further on how he thought this change in thinking about aging could be accomplished, but as developments a decade later would reveal, federal, state, and local policymakers would be actively engaged in designing and implementing programs to bring this change into existence.

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130 Ibid., 71-72.
134 Ibid.
Perkins’ publicly expressed concern about the mounting problems of elderly people was echoed at the same New York conference by Elizabeth Wickenden, a leading figure in both social welfare policy and liberal Democratic Party circles. In her remarks, Wickenden noted that the United States’ “abundant economy and unprecedented advances in medical science have permitted more than 13,000,000 of our countrymen to live beyond… the sixty-fifth birthday…[but] our society does not offer to this older group the same opportunities for self-realization that it extends to those that are younger.”

Other voices added their concern over the gap between the growing number of elderly people and the lack of a well-defined social role for many older people. Returning from a trip to Scandinavia, Ollie A. Randall, the national president of the American Gerontological Society, reported her impressions of the social role which older people enjoyed in other countries, noting that “we sensed above everything else a feeling that nothing was too good for the old people. It is something that we in this country have not acquired to the same degree.” In Scandinavia and the United Kingdom, elderly people were eligible not only for old age pensions; most also qualified for government subsidized low-rent housing, free medical care, and were encouraged to remain working rather than to retire. For those older people who had retired, free hot meals were provided by mobile food service and a vigorous government-sponsored network of social clubs provided older people with companionship and purpose. Enviously comparing the paucity of American assistance to the elderly with that available in western Europe, one American welfare official could only conclude that “it puts to shame the meager efforts in this country.”

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137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
However dilatory the Eisenhower administration may have been during its first term in dealing with the problems of older Americans, the President did eventually take some actions to better coordinate and direct federal programs on behalf of the elderly.\textsuperscript{139} In 1956, Eisenhower authorized the creation of a Special Staff on Aging within the Office of the HEW Secretary.\textsuperscript{140} In addition, Roswell Perkins’s newly-established Federal Council on Aging replaced an informal ad hoc Interdepartmental Working Group on Aging that had bounced around within the administration without being attached to any particular department or agency.

By placing direct responsibility for the Special Staff on Aging with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Eisenhower administration hoped to demonstrate that it was taking the problems of older Americans seriously. As the President’s memo creating the Federal Council noted,

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[i]n considering the changed circumstances presented by the lengthening life span, we must recognize older persons as individuals – not a class – and their wide differences in needs, desires, and capacities. The great majority of older persons are capable of continuing their self-sufficiency and usefulness to the community if given the opportunity. Our task is to help in assuring that these opportunities are provided.\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

However, the question of how exactly to define the problems of older Americans and their possible solutions continued to vex the Eisenhower administration’s domestic policy makers. Even after Eisenhower signed new amendments to the Social Security Act in 1956 that helped to broaden and

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expanding eligibility for the program, officials within the administration continued to debate how best to deal with the problems of aging people in the long-term beyond expanding Social Security.142

While these officials agreed that the elderly should not be treated as a “class,” and that state and local governments (as well as private voluntary organizations) should take the lead, other questions abounded. What was the appropriate way to “help make it possible for older persons who desire and are able to work to continue their productive lives through suitable gainful employment”?143 Or how could the federal government “help lessen anxiety about economic insecurity in the later years through an improved income maintenance program,” given the administration’s reluctance to expand the federal government’s reach by creating new social welfare programs?144

As the Eisenhower administration recognized, the federal government could “not enact happiness” but it could “attempt to reduce barriers to continued social usefulness and a fuller life for older people,” which included “restricted opportunities for useful employment, insufficient income for retirement, living arrangements unsuited to real needs or income, ill health, and lack of preparation for retirement.”145 Some initiatives to achieve this end were eventually undertaken. The federal Labor Department, for example, strengthened its nationwide employment service system to place older workers back into active employment, noting that “individual older workers receive

144 Ibid.
special attention in all public employment offices” and “sustained efforts are made to eliminate or reduce artificial age barriers.”

Gradually, the Eisenhower administration came to embrace a public-private approach to solving the issues of older Americans. By design, its Federal Council on Aging remained limited both in terms of manpower and resources allocated, which meant that it was unlikely to compete with larger, better funded entities within the federal government. Instead, the Council used its limited resources to encourage increased cooperation among state and local governments and private voluntary groups which were involved in the day-to-day minutiae of dealing with the problems of older people.

Over time, it became clear that the Eisenhower administration’s three top policy priorities for older Americans were to ensure that older people would be able to find gainful employment, provide income support for those older people who remained unemployed, and finally to provide subsidies to the private housing construction industry and thus encourage banks and real estate developers to increase the supply of housing suitable for older people on fixed incomes. On the issue of providing access to affordable health care, the Eisenhower administration declined to support measures designed to use public funds to subsidize the costs associated with medical care and hospitalization. Instead, it chose to support increased funding for medical research and the construction of hospitals. In sum, the Eisenhower administration proved at times to be quite willing to use state power to improve the lives of older Americans, albeit in much more narrowly channeled

146 Ibid.

147 The Eisenhower administration’s renewed emphasis on this issue appears to have been largely welcomed by the states as a natural progression of the existing federal-state relationship created by the Social Security program to fund and administer old-age assistance programs. By this point, the federal government was heavily subsidizing state old-age assistance programs, but the administration had already taken steps to arrest the rising costs of Social Security’s Old-Age Assistance program by emphasizing instead the expansion of Social Security’s contributory Old-Age Insurance program. In essence, the federal government was trying to lessen its role in providing financial relief to impoverished older people and to instead emphasize new programs that would allow the elderly to be “self-supporting” or “self-caring” rather than financially dependent. See Bess Furman, “Plan to Aid Aged Gains in Capital,” The New York Times, April 1, 1956.
and cramped ways than it probably could have, given Eisenhower’s popularity and favorable relations with Congress during much of his tenure in office.

Once established, the Eisenhower administration’s Federal Council on Aging seems to have met infrequently, and produced far more paperwork than policy.\textsuperscript{148} The Council did produce some reports which enjoyed limited circulation within the administration, but was terribly constrained by the part-time nature of its staff (most of whom were borrowed from other departments), limited funds, and lack of an effective legislative mandate to investigate, enforce, or propose problems such as age discrimination in the workplace or the lack of adequate health provision for older people in many parts of the United States.\textsuperscript{149} Increasingly cognizant of the Council’s limitations, Eisenhower publicly ordered that it be strengthened and given cabinet rank in March 1959, but by then congressional Democrats and organized labor had seized the initiative from the administration in defining how best to solve the problem of old-age security.\textsuperscript{150} By September 1959, even the Federal Council had to acknowledge in its official report to the President that “inadequate income can mean inadequate medical care,” a connection it had heretofore pointedly omitted.\textsuperscript{151} Beyond such relatively plain language the Council dared not go.

\textsuperscript{148} Memorandum from Louis H. Ravin to Members of the Federal Council on Aging, December 11, 1956, The President [DDE] (1) file, Box 20, Papers of Arthur S. Flemming, 1939-1975, DDEL.
\textsuperscript{149} To some extent, these limits were also self-imposed. See, for example, the Council’s first annual report released in 1957, which emphasized that the “Federal Council on Aging should be an extremely active coordinating mechanism, but should not attempt to build a large staff or assume operating functions better performed in the individual departments or agencies” in OF 156-F Aged & Aging (2) file, Box 709, Papers of Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), 1953-61, Official File, DDEL.
\textsuperscript{150} Dwight D. Eisenhower to Arthur S. Flemming, March 7, 1959 in OF 156-F Aged & Aging (2) file, Box 709, Papers of Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), 1953-61, Official File, DDEL. For unions like the UAW, increases in Social Security benefits were a mixed blessing, as some major collective bargaining agreements, such as the ones wrought from Ford and G.M., permitted companies to deduct increases in Social Security from the private pension benefits paid out to workers. This may have dampened the enthusiasm of some rank-and-file workers to support the UAW’s efforts to fight for higher Social Security benefits, since such benefits – while no doubt helpful for many older Americans – did not actually increase the pensions which retired UAW members could expect to receive. See J.E. McMahon, “Many to Lose Rise in Social Security,” \textit{The New York Times}, September 7, 1952.
\textsuperscript{151} Report to the President – September 1959, The Federal Council on Aging, in OF 156-F Aged & Aging (3) file, Box 709, Papers of Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), 1953-61, Official File, DDEL.
Marion Folsom, the Eisenhower Administration, and the Struggle for Health Security

Once the Eisenhower administration had made its reluctant peace with Social Security, other proposals began to percolate up through the administration’s ranks.152 Nelson Rockefeller, then serving as an Under Secretary in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, urged the administration in January 1955 to do more to provide subsidized housing for retired workers, though his counsel was usually politely ignored by other administration officials.153 Requests made by outside groups for more concrete action by the administration were met with noncommittal answers. In one typical response, after receiving a telegram from a Berkeley, California senior citizens grassroots organization in 1956, pleading for the administration to do something about “the pressing problems confronting the over 13 million voters 65 years and over in the United States,” Howard Pyle, a deputy assistant to President Eisenhower, responded by highlighting the “determined efforts of the Administration to combat inflation” as “perhaps of greatest benefit to citizens who have pensions and savings accounts,” a response that neatly sidestepped the issue of providing health care coverage through the Social Security system.154 The point was clear: while interested in the

152 This shift in the administration’s approach likely reflected Eisenhower’s continuing insistence upon curtailing federal spending; the same Cabinet meeting agreed that “the federal share of new cases of old age assistance grants from now on should be allowed to go no higher than 50%” and that “the Administration will not press for an additional grant-in-aid program for medical care for the aged pending further discussions by the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare with local officials to explore the possibility of greater local assumption of these expenses,” an outcome which seemed unlikely given the unwillingness of private insurers to provide coverage to older Americans and the overall rising costs of providing such care.


154 Howard Pyle to F.H. McNair, Chairman, Berkeley Senior Citizens League, 1600 Grove Street, Berkeley, California, August 30, 1956, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), General File, 1953-61, Box 1048 GF 133-F Old Age: the Aged: The Aging: Gerontology (1), DDEL. Eisenhower continued to hold fast to this belief in the overarching importance of keeping inflation at bay. In a personal and confidential letter to HEW Secretary Arthur Flemming in November 1958, Eisenhower reiterated his argument that “one of the most necessary things now to do in my opinion is to assure our people, and indeed, other peoples, in the soundness of the American dollar...to my mind, nothing could provide greater reassurance in this field than could the presentation of a balanced budget.” Eisenhower further added that “if we are to maintain a healthy economy under our traditional concepts of free enterprise and the maximum of individual liberty, then it is quite clear that we must not destroy incentive” (underlining in original). See Dwight D. Eisenhower to Arthur S. Flemming, November 15, 1958, The President [DDE] (1) file, Papers of Arthur S. Flemming, 1939-1975, Box 20, DDEL.
problems of older people, the administration did not support efforts to create expensive new
government programs to assist the elderly; if at all possible, it would try to encourage the creation of
private rather than public solutions to the problems of older Americans.

In this vein, not long after he had taken the oath of office in 1955 as HEW Secretary, Marion
Folsom, a former senior executive with Eastman Kodak and well-connected member of the
Republican Party’s Northeast wing, convened a friendly breakfast with the presidents of the nation’s
leading private life insurance companies. The purpose of the breakfast, Folsom later recalled, was to
try and persuade the assembled insurance industry leaders to underwrite a health insurance policy
for retired people which would offer them adequate coverage once they had ceased to be eligible for
employer-provided health care benefits. Folsom’s proposal was backed by the full support of the
administration, which was increasingly becoming determined to find a solution to the mounting
question of providing health insurance to older Americans without having to employ the Social
Security system or to set up a new government program to do so. The Eisenhower administration’s
preferred solution was to offer financial support in the form of reinsurance to privately underwritten
insurance plans, provided there was sufficient interest and commitment on the part of the nation’s
largest life insurance companies in doing the actual work of creating and administering such a plan.

Essentially, the Eisenhower administration wanted private insurers to offer health insurance
plans to senior citizens, and would reimburse them for any financial losses that such plans might
sustain. The reaction Folsom got to his proposal was not encouraging. As one unnamed insurance
company president told him: “Marion, you’ve got to realize that we are in business. We’re not
politicians here. And being in business, we are responsible to our stockholders, and we’ve got to
make money. It’s just as simple as that.”155 In the somewhat heated exchange which followed,
Folsom replied to the assembled gathering that “you gentlemen seem to be operating on an ostrich-

155 Oral History Interview of William Mitchell #2, January 30, 1968, pages 62-64. Interviewer: Peter Corning, DDEL.
like basis; if you don’t move more rapidly and more effectively in this field, the government is going to take over, just as sure as the day follows the night.”  

Though he pointed out that any delay on the part of the insurance companies was likely to galvanize demands that the federal government intervene in the matter, he met stiff resistance. As Folsom later remembered:

When the [insurance company] presidents got back to their offices and got in touch with their lawyers, they were scared to death. Their lawyers said, “Don’t you have anything to do with Washington. If you get into anything with anything else in Washington they’re going to be regulating the whole [life insurance] industry. We want to keep it under state regulation. We don’t want the federal government regulating the life insurance companies.” So the big [insurance] companies were scared off…So that was the end of that plan. 

Folsom was puzzled by the resistance he encountered. During his tenure as a senior executive at the Eastman Kodak Company, he had helped oversee the adoption of a medical plan, and had also worked with the administration of Republican New York Governor Thomas Dewey to adopt a statewide disability plan to provide coverage to state employees. Both plans had been successful, and Folsom could not understand why other states and private corporations had not undertaken similar measures.

156 Ibid.
157 Oral History Interview of Marion B. Folsom #2 of 2, February 27, 1968, pages 140-141. Interviewer: John T. Mason, Jr., DDEL. Roswell Perkins, an Assistant HEW Secretary, also recalled that the private insurers viewed the Eisenhower administration’s plan as “the beginning of a possible road down to federal regulation of insurance that they just could not, on behalf of themselves, their stockholders, their policy holders, tolerate no matter how worthy even if they were in sympathy with the general efforts. They simply said to themselves, I’m sure, ‘We don’t care how laudable it is. You’ve simply got to find another route, and we don’t even care that you’re trying to save private health insurance. We simply cannot go along with a structure and a program that begins to get the federal government into our books.’ That was a tremendous factor in the defeat of the [Eisenhower administration’s] re-insurance bill.” See Oral History interview with Roswell Perkins (April 2, 1966), Social Security Administration Project, pgs. 79-80, Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York. The AFL-CIO and the AMA also refused to lend their support to the administration’s proposal, which similarly doomed it. See Oral History interview with Roswell Perkins (1967), Social Security Administration Project, pg. 41, Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York. Folsom’s successor Arthur S. Flemming also tried unsuccessfully to lobby commercial insurers to step into the breach and provide affordable health care plans for the elderly, but like Folsom before him met staunch resistance from representatives of the insurance industry. See Farnsworth Fowle, “Flemming Urges Surety for Aged,” The New York Times, July 29, 1959.
Disappointed by the refusal of private insurers to be more proactive in addressing the needs of older Americans, Folsom increasingly sought to put the administration ahead of the issue. At a Cabinet meeting in early June 1958, he gingerly brought up the subject of adding hospitalization coverage to the Social Security system, only to be met with Eisenhower’s fervent insistence that holding down inflation was of paramount importance to older Americans on fixed incomes.158 Defeated, Folsom would later come out in favor of Medicare in 1961, but his words of caution went unheeded by the President.

Eisenhower’s insistence upon holding down inflation was not groundless. By 1958, federal agencies distributed more than $12 billion in funding to programs aimed at helping older Americans, with the vast majority of these funds disbursed through the Social Security old-age assistance and insurance programs. The growth of these programs and the lack of coordination between the various federal departments responsible for administering them meant that the federal government’s activities were fragmented on the whole and duplicative in many respects. For example, as a confidential cabinet memo circulated among senior Eisenhower administration officials had acknowledged in January 1959, both HEW and the Department of Veterans Affairs sponsored public health and rehabilitative programs, despite the administration’s declared position that the federal government’s activities remain within “existing fiscal limitations.”159

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158 Record of Action, Cabinet Meeting of June 6, 1958, prepared June 11, 1958, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President of the United States, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Cabinet Series, Box 11, Cabinet Meeting of June 6, 1958 file, DDEL. Folsom had urged Eisenhower to take action to “raise the benefit level of Social Security and public assistance payments” and not “to take a flatly negative position on these proposals” lest there be “undesirable legislation...forced upon us [the Eisenhower administration] with damaging political repercussions.” See memorandum, Robert Gray to Sherman Adams, June 3, 1958, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President of the United States, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Cabinet Series, Box 11, Cabinet Meeting of June 6, 1958 file, DDEL. Folsom had been making similar warnings to Eisenhower since at least February 1956. See Record of Action, Cabinet Meeting of February 7, 1956 file, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President of the United States, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Cabinet Series, Box 6, DDEL.

A Modest Record

Despite the lack of coordination amongst the various departments in the Executive Branch, by the summer of 1959, the Eisenhower administration could boast a successful if modest record of accomplishment in developing programs to deal with the nation’s aging population. When they were questioned about this modest record, Eisenhower administration officials tended to emphasize other domestic policy initiatives insofar as they might be applicable to the problems of older Americans. For example, in her testimony to the U.S. Senate’s newly-formed Subcommittee on Problems of the Aging and Aged, HEW Under-Secretary Bertha Adkins stated that “the guarantee of an assured income, free from the ravages of inflation…has been one of the primary concerns of the [Eisenhower] administration.”

Adkins, an educator and longtime Republican Party organizer from Maryland, had been appointed Under Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) in 1958. In that capacity, she worked closely with Arthur Flemming, Marion Folsom, and other moderate Republicans to devise a social policy framework that would allow the administration to occupy the political middle ground between the New Deal and the deeply conservative elements within the Republican Party that sought to undo as much of the New Deal as possible. The Eisenhower administration’s efforts in this regard, such as the creation of the Federal Council on Aging and HEW’s Special Staff on Aging embodied this search for a middle way on domestic policy: use of

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160 In January 1959, Eisenhower had given his personal blessing to the reconstitution of a Federal Council on Aging to consist primarily of Cabinet officers after HEW Secretary Arthur Flemming had lobbied for it. In reality, much of the Council’s actual work was performed by HEW Under-Secretary Bertha Adkins. See Record of Action, Cabinet Meeting of January 30, 1959, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President of the United States, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Cabinet Series, Box 13, Cabinet Meeting of January 30, 1959 file, DDEL.

161 Senate Subcommittee on Problems of the Aging and Aged, Statement of Bertha Adkins, Under-Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare on Programs on Aging in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare before the Subcommittee on Problems of the Aging and the Aged, U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, July 23, 1959, pg. 6, Papers of Bertha S. Adkins, 1907-1989, Box 30, “Programs on Aging in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare,” DDEL. The Senate’s Subcommittee on the Problems of the Aged and Aging was formed in 1959 and was subsequently succeeded by a new Special Senate Committee on Aging in 1961. The Senate Subcommittee and the Special Committee were created at the behest of Senator Patrick McNamara (D-MI) in order to build publicity and support for the enactment of Medicare before and after the 1961 White House Conference on Aging.
the federal government’s power, but with limits placed upon the amount of funds to be expended or manpower to be used, and with a decided emphasis on using federal power in collaboration with state, local, and private sector organizations in order to solve public policy problems.

In order to meet that goal in the field of old-age economic security, Adkins emphasized the efforts of HEW’s Special Staff on Aging starting in the mid-1950s to “develop and maintain liaison with national organizations working in the [aging] field,” including the American Public Welfare Association and the National Committee on the Aging of the National Social Welfare Assembly. These links allowed the Special Staff to “render assistance to organizations in development of activities, planning and conducting conferences, and securing specialized help,” and to operate “an information clearinghouse and publications service.” Overall, the tone that Adkins struck during her testimony was one of cooperation and coordination rather than of discord and dissent: the administration was happy to help assemble the infrastructure necessary to maintain and strengthen the activities of states, localities, and private welfare agencies in meeting the myriad social problems of the elderly. Adkins’ tone was matched by that of her boss, President Eisenhower, who in November 1959 publicly underscored his agreement with the Federal Council on Aging that “responsibility [for the elderly] must be shared by the individual, his family, the community and the local and state governments, as well as by the Federal Government.”

But perhaps the clearest evidence of the Eisenhower administration’s approach to the economic and social problems of older Americans inadvertently came from the testimony of a deputy executive in Department of Labor before the New York State Joint Legislative Committee

162 Ibid., 20-21.
163 By Adkins’ own count, this included 1,800 local employment offices operated by the Department of Labor, the activities of the Housing and Home Finance Agency to secure cost-subsidized housing for older people, and the efforts of the Veterans Administration, as well as new tax benefits for aged and retired persons. (Ibid., 26.)

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on the Problems of the Aging in late 1957. Speaking to the assembled New York State legislators, Newell Brown, an Assistant Secretary of Labor, stated that

> [t]he Federal Government must give overriding priority to defense needs, a responsibility it cannot divide. On what bases then can we expect continued improvement in the conditions under which older people live? There are essentially two bases: (1) a close partnership with State and local governments and voluntary groups and (2) our enormous resources.\(^{165}\)

Lest any of the legislators have missed the point he was making, Brown opined that “I hope that we will never accept the philosophy that the best and only way to meet problems is always more and bigger Federal Government.”\(^{166}\) Instead, Brown argued that “people should consider in each instance whether it is the Federal action that is most needed and likely to be most effective; or whether individual effort and private enterprise or local or state governments that bring the best and most lasting results.”\(^{167}\) This approach was not without its merits; as Brown argued, “it is the [local] community to which all our programs must be oriented… [f]ederal and [s]tate governments can move with more confidence into new activities, if these activities are community-tested and approved,” but such an approach also made it far less likely that any national solutions to systemic problems would be brought forward anytime soon.

**New York Mobilizes**

While the Eisenhower administration debated behind the scenes over how best to approach the mounting issues surrounding old-age security, pressure continued to build at the grassroots level in New York for more thorough intervention by the federal government. Despite New York State’s pioneering efforts during the 1950s to construct a governmental infrastructure capable of more fully


\(^{166}\) Ibid.

\(^{167}\) Ibid.
addressing the needs of the state’s elderly citizens, these efforts had produced modest results which were becoming increasingly ineffective in the face of rising medical costs. These costs had prompted the state to build its own program of medical care for the elderly, though disputes between New York City and the state government in Albany had delayed the city’s residents from participating in the program.168

Despite the success of the state’s efforts to provide affordable public housing for older people, this achievement did little to mitigate the growing need for older people to have access to affordable medical and hospital care.169 As a 1957 report in the New York Times revealed, though the number of elderly people receiving benefits from the New York City Welfare Department was decreasing, the amount of public expenditure for the care of older persons continued to rise.170 In February 1960, a growing ad hoc coalition of New York City-based voluntary organizations sent a joint telegram to the President imploring him to improve the federal government’s initiatives for older Americans. Led by Zalman J. Lichtenstein of the Golden Ring Clubs, the organizations pleaded their case:

Dear Mr. President, we are grateful and much encouraged by the concern you exhibited about us senior citizens at the press [conference] last Wednesday. We look forward with great anticipation to your favorable recommendations for health benefits for Social Security beneficiaries...Good health, decent shelter, and knowing where the next meal comes from are of primary importance to our peace of mind and enjoyment of retirement. Millions of us, when serious illness strikes, without adequate protection, face plain

170 Morris Kaplan, “City Outlays Rise in Aid to Elderly,” The New York Times, January 25, 1957. As Henry L. McCarthy, the city Welfare Commissioner reported, in 1957 “there were fewer than 50,000 persons 65 years and older on the relief rolls [whereas] in 1950 there were 62,000” despite the fact that the city’s older population had not measurably changed during this period. Despite the drop on the relief rolls, New York City was spending approximately $52.4 million dollars on old-age relief in 1957, whereas it had spent only $45.6 million in 1950. McCarthy attributed this increase in expenditures to “greater longevity and its concomitant diseases.” (Ibid.)
terror…Please Mr. President, use your great influence to expand the Social Security Act to contain health provisions… 171

As had been the case during the Great Depression, the growing support of the voluntary organizations for a strengthened federal role in social welfare issues was born of their growing inability to adequately shoulder the mounting costs of old-age security. As Irving Kane, then serving as President of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, stated bluntly in a March 1960 letter to President Eisenhower:

The costs of…medical care for the aged places a heavy burden upon our Jewish voluntary organizations, with inadequate resources, which they are unable to meet even while diverting funds from other essential needs. It is the conviction of our Health Services Committee, our Public Welfare Committee, and our Board of Directors…that Federal responsibility through the use of the OASDI is required. 172

Within a month of the Golden Rings Clubs’ telegram, congressional Republicans’ offices were worriedly reporting to the Eisenhower administration that they were receiving vast numbers of cards asking that they support legislative efforts to enact health care using via the Social Security system. 173 Despite the growing concerns of Republicans on Capitol Hill about the possible costs of opposition to enacting the proposed Forand bill, the Eisenhower administration remained steadfast in its opposition. 174

Surveying this inaction, the administration’s opponents moved into action. A March 1960 rally in New York to demonstrate support for the legislation drew six thousand retired labor

172 Irving Kane to Dwight D. Eisenhower, March 31, 1960, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), General File, 1953-61, Box 1041 GF 133-C Social Security 1960 (1), DDEL.
173 Memorandum, Jack Z. Anderson to Fred Fox, March 25, 1960, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Records as President (White House Central Files), General File, 1953-61, Box 1041 GF 133-C Social Security 1960 (1), DDEL.
members who lustily booed Eisenhower in absentia was followed by an even larger one in May 1960 at Madison Square Garden. The latter rally, which had been organized by the Golden Rings Club, drew a crowd of 15,000 older people who listened and cheered on proponents of the proposed legislation to enact health care via Social Security spoke. Among the speakers were Congressman Aime J. Forand (D-RI), former Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, Mayor Robert Wagner, David Dubinsky of the ILGWU, and Walter Reuther of the UAW, all of whom drew raucous cheers from the assembled crowd as they expounded on the virtues of the legislation. The only Republican speaker at the rally – U.S. Senator Jacob K. Javits – drew boos as he attempted to defend the Eisenhower administration.

The administration defended its non-interference on this issue as necessary to safeguard against government-supported compulsion. As Gerald D. Morgan, Eisenhower’s Deputy Assistant, wrote to an administration supporter:

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, at the direction of the President, is exploring approaches to the problem of providing adequate medical care for the aged which would strengthen existing protection under voluntary auspices. It is consulting groups inside and outside the government, including representatives of the insurance industry. The administration is opposed to the use of a compulsory governmental system to provide health care for social security beneficiaries, and, accordingly, opposes the Forand bill and similar measures. It does not believe that compulsory health insurance constitutes a sound approach to the problem of providing health care services for aged persons.

The Eisenhower administration was not alone in its opposition; the A.M.A. had long crusaded against any such federal intervention in the provision of organized medicine. Likewise, the U.S.
Chamber of Commerce, having lost its earlier fight to prevent the expansion of Social Security, now took to the press to protest that “the whole Social Security program would be jeopardized if it were broadened to provide hospital, nursing home, and surgical services for the aged.”\textsuperscript{178} Given its past record of largely opposing Social Security improvements, the Chamber of Commerce’s protests were not surprising. What was new, though, was how the Chamber attempted to portray itself as a true defender of Social Security’s financial stability by arguing that attempts to include health care coverage for the aged would capsize the entire Social Security system.

This line of argument was different from the one used by the Eisenhower administration, which had initially opposed adding health care for the elderly to Social Security because key officials within the administration – including Eisenhower himself – believed the best course of action was to continue to permit private medicine largely free rein in this arena without government interference. Before the enactment of Medicare in 1965, this argument carried significant weight. After the enactment of Medicare, though, the Chamber of Commerce’s line of argument would prove to be far more potent in allowing opponents of expanding the federal government’s role in social welfare to make their case, namely, that any new social welfare efforts by the federal government could threaten or harm existing ones. By this logic, opposition to enacting Medicare while claiming to support Social Security made sense, and as the politics of social welfare played out over the course of the 1960s, such appeals would become increasingly attractive to opponents of the Great Society’s attempted reforms of domestic social welfare policy.

Ultimately, the Eisenhower administration would, in its twilight years, embrace a federal role in providing medical care for the aged, but sought to do so under a program separate from Social Security, administered solely by individual states, but jointly financed by the federal and state

governments. The Eisenhower administration’s proposed plan also emphasized voluntary participation by Americans aged sixty-five or older, provided that their entire annual income remained below $2,500 (or $3,800 for a couple), and sought to “preserve the opportunity for private insurers to continue to demonstrate their ability to develop major medical expense programs for the aged.”

Sensing that the Eisenhower administration’s reluctance to fully address the issue of providing health insurance for older Americans had created a rare opportunity to spotlight the issue, the AFL-CIO began to increase the pressure on Congress to do something. In his April 1960 testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Problems of the Aged and Aging, James B. Carey, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO’s Industrial Union Department, pointedly stated the AFL-CIO’s hope that the Subcommittee would “bring forth legislation which will improve the material, health


180 Ibid. Monetary figures given are in 1960 dollars. Adjusted for inflation, $2,500 roughly equates to $20,358 in 2016 dollars, and $3,800 equates to $31,000. Source: CPI Inflation Calculator, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. URL accessible at: http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm (Accessed July 25, 1960). The Eisenhower administration’s faith in the willingness of private insurers to voluntarily offer affordable health care insurance policies to older people appears to have been, at best, misplaced. As D.D. Ulfers, an Executive Vice President of Mutual of Omaha conceded in an article he wrote for The Journal of Insurance in December 1961: “Health insurance companies looked closely at senior citizens for the first time in the 1940s. They knew the actuarial risk was serious because of the higher incidence of sickness at higher ages, but they had no experience on which to base rates since there never had been health insurance for the senior citizens. Most policies were terminated at age 65. Only a few policies contained provisions for renewal after this age…Since no actuarial studies were available to determine the cost of health insurance for these older people and since they had little money, health insurance companies were not just wary of offering health coverage, they were downright afraid to do so. This resulted in a limited and awkward step toward health coverage for the senior citizen during the mid-1940s. Mutual of Omaha offered a very limited plan and only in a few states at first and did not promote its sale.” See D.D. Ulfers, “Insuring the Senior Citizen: A Case Study” The Journal of Insurance 28, no. 4 (Dec., 1961): 1-12.

181 Eisenhower likely would have preferred that the federal government play little or no role in the field of healthcare. At the 1959 annual convention of the American Medical Association, Eisenhower told the assembled physicians “if the time ever comes when large numbers of our citizens turn primarily to the Government for assistance in ought to remain a private arrangement between doctor and patient, then we shall all have suffered a tremendous loss.” See Felix Belair, Jr., “President Lauds Private Medicine,” The New York Times, June 10, 1959.
and social status of those whose work years are past” because “the position of the Eisenhower administration, which seems intent upon studying this problem to death.”

Carey’s testimony had come on the heels of a 10,000 member-strong rally of United Auto Workers in Detroit, and was greeted with jeers from Senate Republicans; the normally staid Senator Everett Dirksen pronounced it to be “shameful and stinking.”

Carey countered “that the greatest fear of our older citizens is failing health,” an arguable statement given how frequently the issues of decent housing and adequate income support had cropped up in the letters and telegrams which Eisenhower administration officials had been receiving for years.

From the perspective of the AFL-CIO, though, health costs were the most pressing issue, especially for many retired workers. The pitchfork battles which the AFL-CIO’s various constituent unions had fought with corporate America over the course of the previous decade had revealed just how committed many companies remained to preventing any expansion of negotiated collective bargaining agreements to cover retirees, and the sheer costs of trying to do so singlehandedly had the potential to exhaust much of the funds available in organized labor’s coffers.

Challenging the Eisenhower administration’s emphasis on encouraging private insurers to offer health insurance plans to older Americans, Carey emphasized that “just as private pension plans are not considered a substitute for old age insurance benefits, neither are private health plans a substitute for an over-all insurance approach,” and pointedly stated that “so far as I personally am concerned, the Administration’s shameful surrender to the American Medical Association and to the insurance

183 Ibid., 2.
184 Ibid., 6.
185 Ibid., 7-8.
companies is an outright betrayal of the needs of America’s 16 million elder citizens...[a]s these citizens ponder their fate, they will know full well whom to thank for their plight.”

The Eisenhower administration remained split on the question of how to provide health care for older people, with the President adamantly opposed but some other members of the administration more open to negotiating on the issue. In a private October 1959 meeting with his friend and sometime personal advisor Robert Burroughs, Eisenhower was told that

The problem of the cost of hospital and medical care for the retired aged can be met only through insurance. Very few retired persons have financial resources sufficient to pay for the cost of illness as it occurs. The realistic alternative to insurance coverage is that health care costs of the aged will increasingly be met by relief and public assistance, with consequent loss of dignity and self-respect to individuals and large added burdens on the general revenues...Health protection is the biggest need of the aged and its present lack is the greatest threat to their security. There is a good solution at hand which would do a tremendous amount of good and which would finance the cost on insurance principles, actually saving considerable money from general revenues...

The pressure that organized labor and congressional Democrats were placing on the Eisenhower administration was beginning to have an effect. As William Mitchell, a former Eisenhower administration official, later recalled: “in the welfare field, a rather considerable amount of Flemming’s response was a result of outside pressures of the organized groups in the welfare field, the American Public Welfare Association (APWA), the National Association of Social Workers, outfits like that, to whom he responded very sympathetically, and he very promptly courted their good will.”

The closer links being forged between Flemming and the voluntary organizations which performed much of the actual work in the field of social welfare signified just how much the

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186 Ibid., 9, 12.
188 Oral History with William Mitchell #2, January 30, 1968, pg. 74. Interviewer: Peter Corning, DDEL.
Eisenhower administration had evolved on the issues of Social Security, health care coverage for the elderly, and a host of other issues related to the welfare of older Americans. Eisenhower had come into office emphasizing the dangers of government spending in order to corral inflation; while Eisenhower never fully retreated from these beliefs, high ranking officials in his administration like Marion Folsom, Arthur Flemming, and Bertha Adkins had come to embrace a far more pragmatic if cautious approach that sought to work with voluntary organizations like APWA without openly alienating the American Medical Association or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.¹⁸⁹

Ultimately, the actions taken by the Eisenhower administration strengthened the growing relationship between federal, state, and local officials with private social welfare experts and voluntary organizations. Suspicious of the New Deal social welfare programs it had inherited from twenty years of Democratic rule in Washington, key Eisenhower administration officials like Arthur Flemming, Marion Folsom, and Bertha Adkins worked to bolster alternative options to increasing the reach of the federal government in national social welfare.

In order to accomplish this goal, they worked in conjunction with private social welfare organizations to try and promote solutions to the social and economic problems of older Americans which de-emphasized federal involvement, a striking reversal from the approach which liberals like Eveline Burns and Oscar Ewing has emphasized during the 1940s. By de-emphasizing the role of the federal government as the body primarily responsible for providing economic and social security

¹⁸⁹ As Arthur Flemming later recalled about Adkins, “We had a Special Staff on Aging…I placed this staff under the Undersecretary [Adkins] and gave her responsibility for all Departmental planning for the White House Conference on Aging...these were highly delicate area which were receiving increasing public and governmental visibility. Many complicated problems had to be worked out involving often antagonistic public and private groups and other governmental agencies…I can only say that my faith in Miss Adkins was amply justified by her performance. Considering the fact that the Eisenhower Administration had opposed the authorization of the White House Conference on Aging, nevertheless, under Miss Adkins’ stewardship, and coordination the government produced a very satisfactory conference from the standpoint of the many diverse groups invited to participate. See Arthur Flemming to John J. Corson, October 21, 1963, HEW Programs (2) file, Box 12, Arthur S. Flemming Papers, 1939-1975, DDEL. Like the AMA, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce remained resolutely opposed to the passage of legislation to assist the elderly to pay their medical bills. See “U.S. Chamber Fights All Aged-Aid Bills,” The New York Times, July 7, 1960.
to older people, the administration instead placed much of the burden upon local and state
governments as well as private social welfare organizations. Consequently, while the national
debate over public assistance to older people became focused on Social Security, other issues
separate from Social Security were left to be resolved at other levels of government.

**The 1961 White House Conference on Aging**

The administration’s approach to the problem of economic security in old-age was put on
vivid display during the three years of planning for the 1961 White House Conference on Aging, an
initiative foisted upon the Eisenhower administration by anxious congressional Democrats during
the summer of 1958, and which the administration then successfully delayed to its last days in
January 1961.\(^{190}\) Despite the administration’s limited approach to using government power to
address the economic and social problems of the elderly, it became apparent that numerous states
had already developed extensive state-level commissions and activities designed to promote the
enactment and implementation of policies that might be proposed at the conference.\(^{191}\) For example,
forty-seven of the forty-eight states had availed themselves of federal funds to conduct state level
conferences leading up to formal participation in the national White House Conference, which
suggested just how much the mounting problems of the elderly cut across traditional regional

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\(^{190}\) See “Reports to the President on Pending Legislation Prepared by the White House Records Office, (Bill File), Sep. 2
1958-Sep. 2 1958” Appr. 9/2/58 To provide for holding a White House Conference on Aging…H.R. 9822 (file), Box
142, DDEL. Tellingly, the legislation proposing the 1961 White House Conference on Aging declared that “the primary
responsibility for meeting the problems of the aging is that of the States and local communities; but that all levels of
governments must share in this responsibility; and that it is the policy of the Congress that the Federal Government shall
work jointly with the States and their citizens to develop recommendations and plans for action to meet the needs of the
aging.” See Phillip S. Hughes to Dwight D. Eisenhower, August 30, 1958, “Reports to the President on Pending
Legislation Prepared by the White House Records Office, (Bill File), Sep. 2 1958-Sep. 2 1958” Appr. 9/2/58 To provide
for holding a White House Conference on Aging…H.R. 9822 (file), Box 142, DDEL. As the Bureau of the Budget
warned, though, “the proposed conference could result in developing heavy pressures for costly new and expanded
Federal programs, unless the responsibility of States and communities and of private individuals and organizations is
given adequate emphasis…the Senate Committee report and the bill itself stress State and local responsibility for
meeting the meeting of the aging, and we hope that this objective will be given continued major attention in the
planning and conduct of the White House Conference. (Ibid.)

\(^{191}\) By 1960, the states which had established commissions to deal with their older populations included California,
Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina,
Times*, September 9, 1952.
divisions and ideological barriers which normally beset and prevented unified action among the states.¹⁹²

Increasingly, these state-level conferences revealed significant public interest in enacting some sort of legislation to provide economic relief to older people in the form of background papers being prepared by delegates to the conference. This deep interest in health-care legislation for older Americans was likely being driven by the economic effects of inadequate retirement income for older people and for their families. As the New York Times noted in the months leading up to the conference, “for many of the elderly, lack of sufficient funds has turned the added years provided by medical research into a humbling period of prolonged economic dependency. For many of their grown children, it has become an economically untenable period of prolonged responsibility.”¹⁹³

The New York Times’s argument was echoed in the words of one background paper prepared for delegates to the White House Conference on Aging, which made much the same point: “the capacity of adult children to provide for all the needs of aged parents is limited by the modest character of most family incomes, the demands of growing families of children, and the heavy burden of health care among the elderly.”¹⁹⁴

Regardless of the machinations of individual administration members and the swiftly growing number of voluntary old-age organizations, what stood out most about the White House Conference on Aging was the sheer breadth and depth of individuals, institutions, and local communities involved in its planning and execution.¹⁹⁵ Three thousand delegates were on the


¹⁹⁵ The 1961 White House Conference on Aging, like its successors, has received fairly limited attention despite its role in shaping the debate surrounding old age policy development at the federal level. Some scholarship on this topic does exist, although it is primarily at the unpublished dissertation level. See Sue Schock Roderick, “The White House
conference’s invitation list, three hundred national voluntary organizations, and twenty subject areas covering nearly every possible realm of public and private life were prominent on the conference’s manifesto.  

Such diversity of representation was all the more remarkable given the relative paucity of numbers and attention that had met the unofficially sanctioned Truman-era Conference on Aging in the summer of 1950. As Eisenhower administration officials repeatedly emphasized, the 1961 White House Conference on Aging was to be a “Citizens’ Conference” that would “represent the sum total of the thinking, experience, and recommendations of every section of our country.” Implicit in this argument were two factors: first, the desire by the Eisenhower administration not to give any outward appearance of the federal government’s dictating policy to state and local municipalities; and second, the very real fact that, aside from the scattered reports that the Social Security

Conferences on Aging: Their Implications for Social Change,” Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1984. See also Henry J. Pratt, “Symbolic Politics and White House Conferences on Aging,” Society 15, Issue 5 (July 1978): 67–72. Pratt harshly condemned White House conferences on the problems of elderly people as little more than glorified dog and pony shows, claiming that they are “a means of responding to the incipient demands of a large number of older voters – and their allies elsewhere among the voting public – and yet to do so in a setting where symbolic reassurances can be made to appear as action and where rhetoric, skilfully articulated, can seem to be something concrete.” (Ibid., 68). See also Dale Vinyard, “White House Conferences and the Aged.” Social Service Review 53, no. 4 (1979): 655–71. Vinyard offers a more positive assessment than Pratt, writing that while “it is clear that the millennium will not be achieved as a result of a particular [White House] conference or even a series of them. About all that can reasonably be expected is that some modest, incremental policy gains will be achieved or advanced...most conferences will have some immediate policy impact” because “White House conferences generally have a fallout effect over the long run which may lead to a more substantial policy change.” (Ibid., 668). William Bechill, a former U.S. Commissioner on Aging, supported Vinyard’s interpretation, writing in 1990 that “the White House Conferences on Aging have been ‘directional’ and, as a result, have influenced specific legislation.” See William Bechill, “White House Conferences on Aging: An Assessment of Their Public Policy Influences” Journal of Aging & Social Policy 2, Issue 3-4 (1990): 13-25.  

“Symbolic Politics and White House Conferences on Aging,” Society 15, Issue 5 (July 1978): 67–72. Pratt harshly condemned White House conferences on the problems of elderly people as little more than glorified dog and pony shows, claiming that they are “a means of responding to the incipient demands of a large number of older voters – and their allies elsewhere among the voting public – and yet to do so in a setting where symbolic reassurances can be made to appear as action and where rhetoric, skilfully articulated, can seem to be something concrete.” (Ibid., 68). See also Dale Vinyard, “White House Conferences and the Aged.” Social Service Review 53, no. 4 (1979): 655–71. Vinyard offers a more positive assessment than Pratt, writing that while “it is clear that the millennium will not be achieved as a result of a particular [White House] conference or even a series of them. About all that can reasonably be expected is that some modest, incremental policy gains will be achieved or advanced...most conferences will have some immediate policy impact” because “White House conferences generally have a fallout effect over the long run which may lead to a more substantial policy change.” (Ibid., 668). William Bechill, a former U.S. Commissioner on Aging, supported Vinyard’s interpretation, writing in 1990 that “the White House Conferences on Aging have been ‘directional’ and, as a result, have influenced specific legislation.” See William Bechill, “White House Conferences on Aging: An Assessment of Their Public Policy Influences” Journal of Aging & Social Policy 2, Issue 3-4 (1990): 13-25.  


Bertha Adkins, “The Philosophy of the White House Conference,” speech delivered before the National Leadership Training Institute Dinner, Ann Arbor, Michigan, June 25, 1959. National Leadership Training Institute, White House Conference on Aging, University of Michigan, 6/24-25/59 file, Papers of Bertha S. Adkins, 1907-1989, DDEL. Adkins further added that “the President and Congress believe that while the primary responsibility for meeting the challenges and problems of aging is that of the States and communities, and of individuals themselves, the Federal Government should work jointly with the States and their citizens to develop recommendations and plans for action.” Moreover, “these recommendations and plans for action would look toward the purpose of assuring middle-aged and older persons [sic] equal employment opportunities, providing such persons with adequate incomes, suitable housing, and assistance in preparing themselves for their later years, and stepping up research in the field of aging.” Ibid. Notably, publicly subsidized health insurance for older Americans was omitted from Adkins’ list.  

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Administration was able to make available on an occasional basis, the federal government lacked any real, permanent apparatus for collecting, collating, and comprehending information about the nation’s older population.

Ultimately, the long-delayed White House Conference on Aging in January 1961 recommended that the Social Security system should be utilized as the primary framework for organizing health care for older Americans, a position starkly at odds with the one staked out by the Eisenhower administration, but one that was consistent with the AFL-CIO and the incoming Kennedy administration’s thinking on how best to use the federal government’s resources to address the issue of economic security in old age. While much of the conference’s numerous policy recommendations would gather dust for the next four years, the advent of the Great Society in 1964-5 would make them relevant as the Johnson administration searched for new and innovative ways to address the needs of senior citizens beyond the provision of health care.

Conclusion

In the meantime, localities like New York City and California took the initiative to provide subsidized housing, to build new community centers, and to enact laws designed to protect the welfare of older people. In the decade between the first National Conference on Aging in 1950 and the 1961 White House Conference on Aging, these efforts multiplied and spread as local officials worked to bridge the gap between the needs of older people and the lack of governmental services to meet those needs. These efforts enjoyed the verbal blessing but not the financial backing of the Eisenhower administration, which argued that spending on any new social welfare programs would merely lead to increased inflation and thus hurt older people living on fixed incomes. Instead, the administration commended private sector actors to fill the gap between the unmet needs of older people (which increasingly meant the need for access to affordable health insurance by the end of the 1950s) and the limited support provided by Social Security. This course of action helped to
amplify the fragmentation of social services provided to older people, and to ensure that such services would also vary widely from state to state. Subsequent efforts to rectify this development by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations like the passage of the Older Americans Act in 1965 would have to address these disparities, even as they attempted to erect a new national framework to provide essential services to older people, wherever they lived.

By 1959, the shift from old-age assistance to old-age insurance had dramatically decreased the costs associated with relief while seemingly bolstering economic security. Old-age assistance rolls had peaked in September 1950 at 2,890,000 enrolled individuals; by April 1959 this figure had diminished by 450,000, with further reductions expected as assistance recipients were replaced by social insurance recipients.198 This trend would continue into the 1960s, as the effects of the Social Security amendments passed during the course of the 1950s gradually brought more categories of workers into the system while significantly bolstering the benefits that its social insurance program provided.

Social Security’s social insurance program expansion was made possible by the Eisenhower administration’s reluctant conclusion that improving Social Security would be less costly in the long-run than abolishing it. The disempowerment of southern Democrats between 1953 and 1955, also made the expansion possible because it removed a key congressional obstacle to reform efforts, given the traditional proclivity of southern Democrats for growing Social Security’s old-age assistance program rather than its old-age insurance program. While not originally intending to do so, the Eisenhower administration strengthened Social Security as a way to ensure that future administrations and Congresses would not be tempted to overpromise and spend more on public assistance to older people, a development it feared would prove disastrous in the long-term to the nation’s fiscal stability.

While this development was, on the whole, beneficial to many older Americans, it still sidestepped the crucial issue of health security that had been mounting since the late 1940s and the early 1950s. For most of its duration, the Eisenhower administration, led personally by the President himself, had adamantly opposed the enactment of health insurance for Social Security recipients, and had largely aligned itself with the A.M.A. and some elements within the business community in viewing such expansion of government power as unnecessary and unwise interference in the realm of organized medicine and private commercial insurance. Only in 1960 did the administration grudgingly embrace a limited new government program, the Medical Assistance for the Aged (MAA) that allowed individual states to use means testing to determine which older people would qualify for financial assistance in paying their medical bills, with a mixture of state and matching federal funds to support such assistance.199

While the Eisenhower administration and its allies battled an increasingly restive Democratic Congress and organized labor movement during the 1950s over the issue of health security for older Americans, policy developments at the state and local level began to outstrip the types of assistance offered by the federal government. State, local, and private welfare officials, primarily in New York City and California, worked to construct a new social welfare infrastructure, which would be capable of addressing the growing community and social service needs of their elderly resident population. While economic and health needs remained of paramount importance, state and local officials increasingly turned their attention to programs designed to provide affordable public housing, senior community centers, and educational opportunities designed to help foster access to part-time employment and voluntary roles within the community.

199 As Julian Zelizer observes, the Medical Assistance for the Aged program’s reach was quite limited: “only twenty-eight states had adopted it, and the guidelines for participation were so stringent that only one per cent of the elderly received benefits.” See Julian Zelizer, “How Medicare Was Made,” The New Yorker, February 15, 2015. Accessed at the New Yorker website, source URL: http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/medicare-made (accessed March 29, 2017).
Their motivation for doing so was, in part, underpinned by the wealth of new academic studies that had emerged over the course of the late 1940s and into the early 1950s which offered a new active and dynamic portrait of older people’s lives than policymakers had been previously assumed to be the case. Rather than seeking to merely supplement the meager financial resources of older people, state and local officials celebrated them as elder or “senior” citizens without whose wisdom and experience local communities would be impoverished. While some of this rhetoric was at times, vacuous or patronizing, it did signify another evolutionary step in the development of the senior state. Rather than merely viewing the elderly as undifferentiated mass of citizens who could be bamboozled or misled by possible charlatans like Dr. Francis Townsend or other such figures, local and state welfare officials in New York and California began to see them as individuals who could contribute to society, whether by remaining in the workforce longer (and thereby delaying their retirement and receipt of Social Security benefits and other funds) or by becoming active participants in the newly constructed web of programs and initiatives being erected on their behalf, if not at their beckoning.

Yet even as the senior state developed and deepened in New York, California, and a few other select places, it remained clear to the community of federal, state, and local welfare officials that the range and depth of services available to older people continued to vary widely, with geography, race, gender, and class playing determinative roles. For example, older women continued to benefit the least from improvements to Social Security’s old-age insurance program, which mostly benefitted older and retired white men. Elderly African-American sharecroppers in Mississippi and Louisiana continued to live in impoverished conditions not radically different from what previous generations had known. Sufficient access to adequate health care and medical insurance remained a flash point for many older people, including relatively better off Social Security and private pension recipients, who frequently found that private health insurance plans
were meager in their benefits and excessively stringent in their demands. These issues would come to a head during the 1960s, when the Kennedy and Johnson administrations would embark upon a significant effort to build up federal, state, and local programs designed to assist older Americans and provide millions of impoverished elderly people with access to services, care, and income in retirement on a grand scale.
CHAPTER IV
The War on Elderly Poverty, 1961-1966

Between 1961 and 1973, the senior state simultaneously underwent its most significant transformation and its most dramatic expansion. Starting in 1961 and continuing through the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, social welfare officials at the federal, state, and local level collaborated to identify, develop, and sponsor new programs and initiatives designed to promote economic security in old age and to promote anti-poverty programs aimed at reaching previously neglected and impoverished elderly people. In particular, the Johnson administration unabashedly borrowed academic researchers, social workers, and other social welfare experts for its major taskforces and made ample use of the latest medical and sociological research in order to inform its policy-making process. Though this strategy sometimes produced more proposals than actual policy, Johnson administration officials would work to build a national infrastructure capable of supporting new supplemental income assistance, access to medical care, social service and community programs that reached into less white, less wealthy, and less fortunate places in the nation.

In keeping with this approach, the federal government’s embrace of community and social service programs during this period marked a major transformation of the senior state. Prior to the 1965, the federal government’s initiatives in the realm of old-age policy had been largely confined to economic security, with the enactment of Medicare as a continuation of the contributory model of social insurance that had begun under the original Social Security Act three decades earlier. This limitation came despite the fact that the federal government had sponsored numerous conferences that had suggested new directions for social welfare policy for older Americans outside of the model created by Social Security. Until 1965, most of these reforms remained at the state and local level,
where elected officials in conjunction with social workers, private philanthropies, and representatives of private social welfare organizations had worked to develop and build up a new model of public and private partnership capable of addressing the needs of older people beyond ensuring adequate income in retirement. After 1965, the senior state embraced a threefold approach to the problems of older people: first, an emphasis on adequate income to avoid the stigma of welfare; second, regular medical care and access to in-patient hospital services; and finally, access to new programs designed to improve the education, nutrition, and community integration of older people. All three initiatives were united by the desire of the senior state’s architects to ensure that older people could retain as much social and economic independence as they wanted, in contrast to the traditional poorhouse model of old-age relief that had treated older people as helpless dependents and sought to quarantine and control them.

As important as the developments of the 1960s and the 1970s were to the development of the senior state, there were significant limits of the programs created during this period, along with a few unintended consequences that would have a more dramatic impact in time. The enactment of Medicaid in 1965, for example, released a torrent of federal funds into the lightly regulated nursing home industry, and within a few years’ time had stimulated its speedy growth into a major player in future federal old age policy debates. Additionally, the enactment of Medicare in 1965 did not directly address the issue of providing affordable long-term care, the rising costs of prescription drugs, and or the continuing risk that inflation posed to Social Security benefits. During the course of the 1960s, government spending on the Vietnam War inflated the value of the U.S. dollar and thereby lowered the purchasing power of thousands of older people living on Social Security and eroded the ability of that program to provide a basic level of economic security in old age.

The dramatic expansion of the senior state during the 1960s was partly the result of changes that had been building at the local and state level for years, and partly the result of fortuitous
circumstances. Beginning in 1961, the chief goal of many federal, state, and local officials was to secure the enactment of health insurance via the Social Security system for people over the age of 65. After the enactment of Medicare in 1965, though, federal and state officials tackled a new challenge: ensuring equity in the levels of governmental services and assistance available to older people across the nation. These services could (and did) vary significantly on a state-by-state basis. While access to health care remained important, officials increasingly believed that it required supplementation by additional social and community service programs.

The development of these services co-existed in uneasy tension with the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty.\(^1\) This tension stemmed from the fact that Sargent Shriver, the head of the Office of Economic Opportunity (the Johnson administration’s primary vehicle for conducting the War on Poverty) and his advisers chose to focus their limited resources on alleviating urban poverty. They had done this in the belief that government intervention could break up a persistent “culture of poverty” with job training programs and new educational opportunities for young, predominantly African-American people to become skilled and employable workers.\(^2\)

The focus on alleviating poverty in American cities came under harsh criticism from critics across the political spectrum in the United States, many of whom believed that the Office of Economic Opportunity’s (OEO) methods and vision were misguided or unrealistic. Harsh criticism, in particular, came from Congress, where the Senate’s Special Committee on Aging repeatedly tried to redirect the OEO to do more about elderly poverty in the United States. Such efforts largely fell flat. Eventually, this shortcoming obliged the Johnson administration in 1966 and 1967 to move more aggressively to address the issue of elderly poverty.


Before the War on Poverty

The election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 offered the distinct possibility that efforts to enact health insurance through the Social Security system and to expand the role of the federal government in formulating and administering programs on behalf of the nation’s elderly population would receive a more receptive hearing than during the Eisenhower years. During the 1960 presidential campaign, Kennedy and his aides took pains to signal to surviving New Deal and Fair Deal policymakers that their counsel would be welcome in a Kennedy White House. For example, in order to formulate its social welfare policy goals, the Kennedy campaign relied heavily upon long-established experts like Wilbur Cohen, who had first come to Washington in the early 1930s as a young staff assistant to Edwin Witte on the Committee on Economic Security that had produced the original Social Security Act. Cohen had long been cultivated by Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy’s chief speechwriter, and had ultimately served as unofficial adviser to Kennedy and his staff on social welfare measures for several years before the 1960 presidential campaign. As Cohen recalled,

in 1958 Ted Sorensen asked me to work with Mike Feldman in developing a program for the Senator on the aged...Mike Feldman and I eventually constructed a ten-point program which was called “A Bill of Rights for our Elder Citizens” which Senator Kennedy put in the Congressional Record on August 19, 1958. This material was used repeatedly during the 1960 campaign along with material advocating hospital insurance for the aged through Social Security which was popularly called Medicare.4

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3 For Cohen’s account of his relationship with Sorenson and Kennedy, see Wilbur J. Cohen, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, November 11, 1964, pgs. 8-17, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA (hereafter “JFKL”). Additionally, Cohen recalled “President Kennedy was the first president to send to Congress a special message on aging and it was significant to me that such a young man could be so concerned about the problems of the aging. In all my association I truly believe he was concerned about them. I think his advocacy of this program was one which, along with many others, brought him support in areas where people felt this man of wealth and intelligence was really concerned about the welfare of people in their communities. So I think this ten-point program which Feldman and I developed was very consequential in the unfolding of Kennedy’s philosophy and as a key point in the New Frontier proposals.” (Ibid.)

4 Ibid.
Spurred in part by the activities of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on the Problems of the Aged and Aging’s hearings, which had demonstrated an unexpectedly deep level of interest from many older Americans, Sorensen had taken an interest in pushing for health care for the elderly and in the problems of older Americans more broadly. Soon, statistics and testimonies compiled by the Subcommittee began to find their way into the Kennedy campaign’s strategy, as Sorensen assembled its domestic policy proposals. On the campaign trail during the Democratic Party

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primary season, Kennedy repeatedly spoke out in Michigan, Oregon, and Wisconsin on providing medical care for the elderly.⁶

In doing so, Kennedy was not only seeking to latch onto an increasingly prominent issue that enjoyed growing grassroots interest, but also to attach himself more firmly to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party which still venerated the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt. Joseph Kennedy’s complicated relationship with Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s and the closeness of some Kennedy family members to Senator Joseph R. McCarthy in the 1950s had led Eleanor Roosevelt, still a leading light in the Democratic Party’s liberal wing, to publicly express her skepticism of John F. Kennedy’s liberal bona fides throughout 1960.⁷ Realizing that he was unlikely to unify the Democratic Party without Eleanor Roosevelt’s support, Kennedy traveled to Hyde Park, New York, as a supplicant in August 1960, ostensibly to make a speech commemorating the twentieth-fifth anniversary of Social Security’s enactment, but also to make peace with Eleanor Roosevelt and secure her endorsement.⁸ After his speech, Kennedy dined with Roosevelt and won her grudging support, though she remained distant for much of the rest of the 1960 campaign.

In conjunction with the candidate’s visit to Hyde Park, the Kennedy campaign announced a 23-member “Board of Senior Citizens for Kennedy” on August 26, 1960, in order to “emphasize to

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⁷ See, for example, Eleanor Roosevelt to Mary Lasker, August 15th, 1960, in which Roosevelt offered her estimation of Kennedy and acknowledged her willingness to support him, provided he continued to work on behalf of causes which she had come to embrace (such as the expansion of Social Security) in Allida Black et. al., eds., *Eleanor Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and the Election of 1960: A Project of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers* (Columbia, S.C.: Model Editions Partnership, 2003). Electronic version based on unpublished letters (Accessed September 28, 2016).


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the American people the importance of medical care for older citizens based on the social security principle."9 Created at the behest of the AFL-CIO, the board included liberal luminaries like Oscar Ewing, the former head of the Truman-era Federal Security Agency, Representative John Fogarty, as well as high-ranking labor representatives like Nelson Cruikshank, James O’Brien, and Charles Odell. The board also included Sidney Spector, the chief counsel of the Senate Subcommittee on the Problems of the Aged and Aging and an unofficial representative of Senator Patrick McNamara, the committee’s influential chairman.10

By welcoming the creation of a “board of senior citizens,” something which no major political campaign had hitherto felt the need to do, Kennedy signaled to liberals and to organized

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10 Ibid. Nelson Cruikshank was head of the AFL-CIO’s Social Security Department, while James O’Brien came from the United Steelworkers and Charles Odell from the United Auto Workers.
labor his willingness to give them seats at the domestic policy table in his future administration, and to also woo traditionally conservative older voters to consider supporting his campaign. Satisfied that the Kennedy campaign was now in agreement with its stated goal of pushing for the enactment of health insurance for older Americans through the Social Security system, the AFL-CIO worked vigorously on the campaign trail to build grassroots support for both Kennedy and the proposed Medicare legislation sponsored by Congressman Aime J. Forand. In particular, the AFL-CIO helped to organize huge rallies of senior citizens in New York City to demonstrate public support for Medicare. Tacticians in both the Democratic and Republican parties noted the enthusiastic response of many older people to these rallies, which strongly suggested that the potential power of seniors as an organized group had been galvanized into action once more by the issue of health care insurance.

After Kennedy’s exceedingly narrow win in the November 1960 election, the AFL-CIO’s hope that Medicare’s enactment would soon follow the new president’s inauguration proved to be premature. In part, this development owed something to the Kennedy administration’s cautionary approach. Kennedy had taken hold of an economy that seemed to be basically sound and in good working condition, and popular support for broad social or political reforms was decidedly limited in comparison to the atmosphere that had greeted Franklin Roosevelt’s first inauguration a generation beforehand. In the words of Joshua Freeman,

He [Kennedy] recognized that there were some groups plagued by poverty, like the elderly and residents of Appalachia, for whom he proposed targeted programs. But he believed that economic growth in itself would go a long way toward solving social ills, without the need for redistributive measure or major structural changes.13

Even if there were no pressing national crisis like the Great Depression or World War II, social welfare experts believed that more direct action was necessary to alleviate the plight of impoverished groups in American society. Many were openly dismayed that the highly publicized fights over providing medical care for the aged in the waning days of the Eisenhower administration had proved to be inconclusive.14 For example, at the 1961 annual meeting of the National Council on Aging (NCOA), an organization whose membership largely consisted of voluntary organizations involved in services to elderly people, Geneva Mathiasen, the NCOA’s executive director, publicly expressed her concern that “many matters of interest and concern to her group” had experienced only “limited” or “spotty” progress, including questions of “employment, retirement, health, housing, recreation, education, counseling and community organization” for older people.15

Mathiasen’s concerns were not new; throughout the 1950s, social reformers had repeatedly expressed their belief that more action was required in order to deal with the problems of the nation’s growing elderly population. Mathiasen’s concerns, though, gained renewed credence from the fact that the growth of the nation’s elderly population showed no signs of slowing down or reversing. In June 1961, the U.S. Bureau of the Census reported that advances in medical knowledge and social provision had led to dramatically higher numbers of people surviving into “old age.”16 By the Census Bureau’s count, approximately 16.5 million Americans were aged 65 or over, a figure that the Census Bureau estimated had increased by roughly 420,000 each year

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15 Ibid.
between 1950 and 1960. While not all old people faced the prospect of financial insecurity, a substantial and growing number of them did so because the costs associated with medical, hospital, and long-term care continued to outstrip the capacity of Social Security benefits, private pension payments, in-kind assistance from individual families and other sources of financial support to pay them.

Members of the nascent Kennedy administration were aware of the potential social and economic ramifications that might accompany a rising poverty rate for older people. In the spring of 1961, Abraham Ribicoff, the new Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) appointed a panel of experts to advise him on the federal government’s approach to aging policy. The creation of the HEW panel a few months after the 1961 White House Conference on Aging reflected the belief of some administration officials that the publicity and interest generated by the 1961 White House Conference had created an opportunity to press forward on numerous policy recommendations that could improve the economic and social status of older people.

Like the Eisenhower administration’s Federal Council on Aging before it, the Kennedy-era HEW panel emphasized the inadequacy of income maintenance programs to keep older Americans from falling into penury. Specifically, the HEW panel argued that Social Security’s coverage needed to be extended and that earned income restrictions for recipients of old age assistance

17 Ibid.
19 As Donald P. Kent, a professor at the University of Connecticut and recurrent appointed official in HEW later wrote, “unquestionably the overriding issue at the Conference was how to finance medical care. After extensive and at times acrimonious debate the Income and Maintenance Section [delegates], to which this issue was assigned, voted in favor of a “social security approach” (170 to 99). The Kennedy administration would embrace this overarching goal, but would also eventually in 1963 begin to advocate for many of the conference’s other recommendations as part of the administration’s developing legislative and policy agenda for older Americans. See Donald P. Kent, “The White House Conference in Retrospect,” The Gerontologist 1, no. 1 (March 1961): 4-7.
needed to be lifted in order to encourage older workers to remain in the active labor force longer, and thereby delay their need to rely upon Social Security to make up for lost income. As a result, the increasing financial pressures placed by a growing number of older Americans on the Social Security system would be reduced with limited social and political disruption. State governments and voluntary organizations that had traditionally expended considerable sums on behalf of the elderly would benefit too, as would individual families supporting elderly members. The panel’s embrace of this new approach to Social Security represented a significant shift in how the federal government approached the issue of older workers and the Social Security system.

Specifically, Social Security had been designed by its federal architects to enable some older workers to leave the labor force without risking destitution or dependence upon private and public support. While this approach had been more justifiable during the sluggish economy of the Great Depression, it seemed counterproductive in the economic conditions of the 1950s and 1960s, when a booming postwar economy meant that workforce opportunities were far more plentiful. Improving and adapting Social Security to this new economic environment, the approach favored by the Eisenhower administration during the 1950s, had produced beneficial results, but those improvements had largely been limited to older people who were already qualified to receive Social Security benefits. For example, improvements made to Social Security during the course of the 1950s provided coverage for significantly more workers, but Social Security was still not a universal program. Moreover, the strident efforts of Social Security’s administrators during the late 1940s and early 1950s to keep the program from being lobbed in with welfare programs militated against attempts to enact broad scale reforms of Social Security such as the HEW panel desired.

Perhaps cognizant of the limitations to the existing Social Security system, the HEW panel proposed thirty-two new initiatives that aimed to expand federal efforts to assist older Americans. For example, paralleling the Kennedy administration’s more famous Peace Corps, the HEW panel
proposed the creation of a new “Senior Citizens Service Corps” designed to provide older Americans with community service opportunities, provided that such “corps not infringe on other Federal programs and compete with the labor force” and that “the corps will be used…in the public interest.”21 Other proposals envisioned new efforts to regulate the nursing home industry, enhanced funding to train more doctors to provide geriatric care, and finally, serious federal efforts to eliminate age-based job discrimination in the workplace. The broad scope of these policy proposals was unlike anything the federal government had ever previously recommended on behalf of the elderly.

At the same time, though, the question of where exactly to situate responsibility for these new potential efforts on the part of the federal government to assist older Americans remained unanswered. Should such responsibilities reside solely within the executive branch, or should Congress be somehow involved? And, if these responsibilities were placed solely within the executive branch, what department should have the ultimate statutory authority to enforce them? Ultimately, the HEW panel recommended that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare should have the responsibility to administer any new aging programs, but that there should also be an unspecified “Study Commission to review and evaluate” HEW’s efforts at some future date.22

Even as the Kennedy administration debated how best to grapple with these issues, congressional Democrats like Senator Patrick McNamara (D-MI) barreled forward in demanding swifter action from the administration. On May 15th 1962, President Kennedy, at the behest of Senator McNamara and others, submitted a comprehensive set of legislative proposals to Congress that outlined an expansive agenda of more federal research and demonstration grant programs in the

22 Ibid., 8.
field of aging. As Wilbur Cohen observed in his May 1962 testimony before the House Committee on Education and Labor,

[W]e in the Department [of Health, Education, and Welfare] are cognizant that most of the work with older people cannot be done on the Federal level...instead, programs and services must be conducted and offered in the local communities and neighborhoods where the older people are living...consequently, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has been moving vigorously to stimulate and guide States, communities, and organizations toward an ever-widening range of action.

Herein lay both the greatest strength and weakness of the federal government’s efforts to improve the material well-being of older Americans. On the one hand, the financial resources of the federal government greatly exceeded that of state or local governments, but federal administrators needed the assistance of local officials who were and would likely remain far-better informed about the actual social and economic conditions in their communities. Consequently, the Kennedy-era HEW, like its Eisenhower-era predecessor, placed great emphasis on building productive working relationships with state and local officials, and labored mightily to avoid becoming involved in any initiatives or activities which would cause grave offense to them.

The dependence upon the goodwill of state and local officials also meant that the federal government’s effectiveness was ultimately dependent upon officials not directly responsible to it, and who could, if they desired, cease to cooperate at any moment. Still, as Cohen observed in his testimony,

Some persons lament what they see as a fragmentation of programs and services. They get frustrated because there is not some simple solution for all the problems of aging wrapped up in one neat package and shipped to them prepaid. Major responsibility for coordination

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23 Donald P. Kent to Arthur S. Flemming, May 29, 1962, in Panel of Public Advisors on Aging (3) file, Box 155, Papers of Arthur S. Flemming, 1939-1975, DDEL.

and provision of community services rests with the States and localities. It was for this purpose that the Special Staff on Aging has encouraged the formation of State commissions and has stimulated these commissions to urge the creation of similar coordinating mechanisms in the various committees.25

While Cohen further conceded “our senior citizens are not all right here under the roof of the federal government,” he noted that the Kennedy administration was still taking steps to better coordinate the federal government’s efforts. In May 1962, the administration authorized the conversion of the Federal Council on Aging into a President’s Council on Aging in order to enhance both its visibility and its mandate. Unlike the Eisenhower-era Federal Council on Aging, the Kennedy Council on Aging was composed primarily of Cabinet members rather than designated staff representatives. Furthermore, the administration gave the Council responsibility for providing recommendations to the President on aging policy.26 By doing so, the Kennedy administration hoped that the “new President’s Council on Aging will rapidly increase its effectiveness in assessing national needs, reviewing, and evaluating current Federal programs, coordinating present activities, and initiating such policy recommendations as may be indicated.”27

Amidst the reorganization of the Executive Branch’s efforts to coordinate aging policy, the Kennedy administration authorized the creation and implementation of new experimental programs and demonstration projects. These projects included “wide-range experiments in the development of projects through which older people can employ their energies in serving others and their communities through voluntary effort,” “comprehensive information, referral, and counseling services in local communities to assist older people with their complex problems of employment,

26 Ibid., 17-18.
27 Ibid., 18.
economic dependency, etc.” and “experimental projects in providing part time work.” Most of these projects – especially the experimental demonstration projects – would grow more substantial during the 1960s and into the early 1970s, after the Older Americans Act made additional federal funding available. In New York City, for example, the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare made grant money available in 1962 to local private community service agencies, which in turn organized new recreation and therapeutic centers designed specifically for the city’s 800,000 senior citizens.

If the Eisenhower administration’s efforts had been careful and deliberate to the point of motionlessness, the Kennedy administration’s efforts burst forth in rapid succession. More needed to be done – and more would be done, if the administration had its way, to promote economic self-sufficiency among senior citizens, and to ensure that they would remain integrated as active members of their local communities rather than isolated and confined to its margins. This was the optimistic faith and spirit that guided many of the Kennedy’s administration’s efforts, along with an ebullient confidence that the complex problems of aging could, over time and with the application of multiple initiatives and efforts, be largely reduced to irrelevance.

In May 1962, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare hosted a special day-long program for visiting Japanese Governors. The program was designed to highlight the U.S.

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30 Howard A. Rusk, M.D., “Needs of the Aged II: Recreation and Community Service Are 2 of the Ingredients of a Full Life,” The New York Times, July 15, 1962; “Study on Aging Set,” The New York Times, May 21, 1961. The growing emphasis on rehabilitation and therapy for older people built on the experience of prior Federal-state cooperation on these initiatives during the 1950s, which had demonstrated that vocational rehabilitation could successfully retrain older workers to re-enter the workforce rather than remaining unemployed and dependent upon old-age pensions. The number of rehabilitated older people in these demonstration projects remained small, though. In 1949-1950, for example, only 931 people over the age of 65 participated; the total population of people over the age of 65 in the U.S. stood at 11,000,000. See Howard A. Rusk, M.D., “Potentialities of Elder Folk Studied in U.S. Conference,” The New York Times, August 13, 1950.
government’s growing efforts to deal with the rising number of older Americans, and the chosen
speakers for the day offered a brief but still comprehensive overview of those efforts. In particular,
Donald P. Kent, a former faculty member at the University of Connecticut’s Institute of
Gerontology and now the Special Assistant for Aging in the U.S. Department of Health, Education,
and Welfare summarized the government’s approach:

Our basic philosophy holds that the individual should do for himself whatever he can. His second line of defense should be the family, followed by the level of Government that is nearest to him. The Federal Government only does those things which cannot be done or cannot be done as satisfactorily by local or State governments. Yet another part of the American philosophy is that the Government works in cooperation with other governmental units, with private citizens and with voluntary associations.31

The federal government’s programs, Kent continued, shared “certain basic assumptions,” including the notion that “all individuals shall have the opportunity to obtain at least a minimum standard of shelter, food, and medical care,” and that “the goal of government programs should be to help the individual help himself.”32 As his colleague Warren Roudebush observed, though, there was “no single pattern of relationships in Federal programs” because there was “no single pattern or formula” for “public and private responsibilities in aging.”33

While the Kennedy administration continued to evaluate possible initiatives it could undertake, the issue of financial insecurity among elderly people due to rising medical costs remained frustratingly unresolved. This issue had powered the AFL-CIO’s grassroots efforts to organize and mobilize significant popular support for the enactment of Medicare. Unfortunately, that legislation remained securely bottled up in committee on Capitol Hill, courtesy of Congressman

32 Ibid., 8.
Wilbur Mills, the powerful chairman of the House of Representatives’ Ways and Means Committee. Mills, who had supported the enactment of more modest legislation in the past designed to provide health insurance only to indigent older people (rather than the universal coverage which Medicare’s supporters sought), remained unwilling to allow the legislation to proceed, for fear that its costs might prove detrimental to the overall condition of the Social Security system.

**The Other Americans**

While the Kennedy administration, organized labor, the AMA, and Congressman Mills jostled over the fate of Medicare, the publication of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* in 1962 helped to fix public attention on the multifaceted nature of poverty in the United States. Besides the growth of urban poverty, Harrington gave significant attention to the increasing impoverishment of older Americans.34 Perhaps no chapter in *The Other America* was more poignant or heartrending than the ironically titled chapter “The Golden Years,” in which Harrington claimed that “at least 8,000,000 Americans over sixty-five are poor,” a figure which represented approximately half of the entire senior population in the United States.35 Skillfully employing data made available by the U.S. Senate’s Subcommittee on the Problems of the Aged and Aging, Harrington emphasized the perilous economic status of many older Americans,

34 See James Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (1994; Harvard University Press, 2000), 92. Conflicting accounts abound as to whether or not John F. Kennedy or any of his senior advisers actually read *The Other America*; a steadier consensus holds that Dwight MacDonald’s review of *The Other America* in *The New Yorker* was more widely read, circulated, and digested by key officials (including Kennedy and Theodore Sorenson). See Dwight MacDonald, “Our Invisible Poor,” January 19, 1963, *The New Yorker*, available at http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1963/01/19/our-invisible-poor (Accessed September 24, 2016). As MacDonald observed in his review, “the least obvious poverty affects our ‘senior citizens’ – those over sixty-five. Mr. Harrington estimates that half of them – 8,000,000 – live in poverty, and he thinks they are even more atomized and politically helpless than the rest of the Other America…[t]he problem of the aged poor is aggravated by the fact that, unlike the Italians or the English, we seem to have little respect for or interest in our ‘senior citizens,’ beyond giving them that honorific title, and we don’t include them in family life. If we can afford it, we are likely to send them to nursing homes…and if we can’t, which is the case with the poor, they must make do with the resources noted above [contributions by relatives, Social Security, and relief].” (Ibid., 16-17).

especially those for whom Social Security, personal savings, and other financial instruments
designed to mitigate economic insecurity in old age had proven to be insufficient.\textsuperscript{36} As Harrington
delineated the growing concentration of poverty among older Americans, he observed that “it is a
fact that the problems of the aged are so great that families, probably the majority of them in the
nation, cannot really deal with them…there is literally no alternative but governmental
intervention.”

\textbf{The Rise and Fall of Medicare, 1961-1963}

Harrington’s words did not fall on deaf ears. By 1962, the Kennedy administration had
coalesced around Medicare as its preferred solution to the economic problems of the aged.
Consequently, the Kennedy administration’s response to the question of elderly poverty was to
redouble its efforts to get Medicare enacted, in the reasonable belief that publicly subsidizing the
health costs of older people would keep many of them out of poverty and off the public assistance
rolls.\textsuperscript{37} In May 1962, Kennedy met with the leadership of the National Council of Senior Citizens
(NCSC) in a public display of his administration’s support for Medicare, and spoke at an enormous

\textsuperscript{36} As Harrington observed in the opening chapter of \textit{The Other America}, “one of the major laws designed to cover
everyone, rich and poor, was social security. But even here the other Americans suffered discrimination. Over the years
social security payments have not even provided a subsistence level of life. The middle third have been able to
supplement the Federal pension through private plans negotiated by unions, through joining medical insurance schemes
like Blue Cross, and so on. The poor have not been able to do so…Today’s poor, in short, missed the political and social
gains of the thirties (Harrington, \textit{The Other America}, 9).

\textsuperscript{37} As Robert Ball later recalled, Medicare was born from the ashes of the Truman administration’s defeat in the late
1940s to enact national health insurance. In an article published thirty years after Medicare’s enactment, Ball
remembered that “even before the AMA launched its attack, however, the Truman administration had given up on a
universal health plan and was casting about for something less ambitious that might have a better chance. That is how
Medicare was born. It was publicly advocated for the first time by a government spokesman when Oscar Ewing, head of
the Federal Security Agency (later the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and now the Department of Health
and Human Services), unveiled the plan on February 26, 1952. The idea was to cover all Social Security beneficiaries
(the elderly, widows, and orphans; persons with disabilities were not yet under Social Security). The Social Security
program was part of the Federal Security Agency, and we had worked up the plan for Ewing. Initially, it went nowhere.
President Truman never specifically endorsed the shift from support of universal health insurance to the limited
Medicare program, but even if he had, he would not have been able to get Congress to consider it. He was within a few
months of the end of his term, and his would-be successor, Adlai Stevenson, was soon to be overwhelmingly defeated
by General Dwight Eisenhower.” See Robert M. Ball, “Perspectives on Medicare: What Medicare’s Architects had in
Mind,” \textit{Health Affairs} 14, no. 4 (1995): 62-72. For a somewhat different account of the same story, see Edward Annis,
M.D., “Medicare and the Destruction of Freedom in Medicine: Recollections of Dr. Edward Annis,” \textit{Journal of
rally later that same month at Madison Square Garden in New York City on behalf of the measure. Kennedy’s nationally televised speech at Madison Square Garden was supposed to be a dramatic high point for this campaign, and the administration as well as the AFL-CIO hoped a strong performance by the telegenic Kennedy would strengthen popular support for the campaign to enact Medicare.

Figure 7. John F. Kennedy meets with National Council of Senior Citizens members, May 26, 1962. Photo courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library.

38 The AFL-CIO had been instrumental in the creation of the NCSC after Kennedy’s victory in the 1960 presidential race. In fact, the NCSC was the lineal descendant of the Kennedy campaign’s “Senior Citizens for Kennedy” group formed after Kennedy’s August 1960 visit to Eleanor Roosevelt at Hyde Park, New York. In order to try and keep the momentum of the campaign going after Kennedy’s inauguration, the NCSC had spearheaded highly publicized efforts to organize and rally retired union members as well as other interested senior citizens in New York, Florida, and elsewhere to support the Kennedy administration’s efforts to enact Medicare. See Natalie Jaffe, “2,646 Over 65 Fill Orchestra’s Hall,” The New York Times, May 17, 1963; Natalie Jaffé, “Hundreds Attend Hearing for Aged,” The New York Times, January 19, 1964.
Unfortunately, though, many viewers found Kennedy’s speech distasteful and beneath the dignity of his office. Arthur Krock of the New York Times described it as contributing to “misinformation” in the increasingly volatile national debate over Medicare because it ignored private, non-governmental efforts to improve access to health care for older people without requiring “compulsory” measures. Furthermore, Dr. Edward Annis, a Florida surgeon and AMA public representative gave an artfully staged rebuttal speech at Madison Square Garden the following night that skillfully opposed the proposed Medicare legislation by labeling it as a “cruel hoax and delusion.” Dr. Annis argued that Medicare – far from guaranteeing the economic security of older people – would instead offer inadequate coverage and threaten the vitality of existing private health insurance programs. Dr. Annis’s speech received comparatively more favorable press coverage, and successfully dented much of the momentum that the administration and the AFL-CIO had built in favor of Medicare.

Several weeks after the Madison Square Garden debacle, the NCSC arranged for hundreds of senior citizens to be bused to Capitol Hill as a way to demonstrate continued popular support for the proposed Medicare legislation that would be unavoidable for the numerous Congressmen and Senators present at the Capitol. As the NCSC had hoped, even anti-Medicare representatives felt

42 Oral History interview with William Hutton (1966), Social Security Administration Project, pgs. 90-91, Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.
obliged to meet with the visiting senior citizens, lest they be caught turning away constituents.\footnote{Ibid., 94.}

Such meetings, though, while perhaps mollifying for the senior citizens who had traveled to the Capitol, did little to dislodge entrenched congressional opposition to Medicare.

Ultimately, the combination of Annis’s well-received speech and Kennedy’s lackluster effort successfully halted the popular momentum that the administration and the AFL-CIO had labored for months to build. As a result, both the Kennedy administration and the AFL-CIO watched as Congressman Wilbur Mills continued to sequester the proposed Medicare legislation in the Ways and Means Committee. Mills’ successful efforts to block the enactment of Medicare, though, did not mean that the issue of rising poverty and economic insecurity for older Americans had disappeared from public view. On the contrary, as a lengthy November 1962 article in the *New York Times* revealed, a consensus had emerged among numerous public and private social welfare experts that “retirement laws” like Social Security that “were meant to be a blessing” were instead “proving the opposite.”\footnote{Ibid., 94.}\footnote{Arthur Herzog, “Portrait of Our ‘Senior Citizens,’” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1962.} As if to underscore its point, the *Times* noted, “poorer people are the bulk of the old – if you weren’t poor before you reached your 65\textsuperscript{th} year, you are likely to be so afterward.”\footnote{Ibid.} This broad agreement about the rising specter of old age poverty publicly echoed the concerns which Geneva Mathiasen and the National Council on the Aging had raised the previous year, and signaled that the issue was not going away anytime soon.

Mindful of the need to keep its allies in the organized labor movement happy, the Kennedy administration continued to keep an open channel to the National Council of Senior Citizens, in part because Kennedy’s advisors wanted him to give the appearance of actively advocating for Medicare, despite the legislative impasse. In truth, though, the struggle for racial justice by the civil rights movement in the South had come to occupy far more of the administration’s attention and

\footnote{Ibid., 94.}
energy by the spring of 1963.\textsuperscript{46} While Kennedy continued to appeal publicly for action on the issue of medical care for the aged, it remained unclear how those appeals would become concrete accomplishments.\textsuperscript{47} In essence, despite all the smoke generated by the Kennedy administration and by the NCSC, Medicare could not make it past the hurdles that Congressman Mills had erected in its path.\textsuperscript{48} In February 1963, Kennedy sent a lengthy Special Message to Congress in which he proposed legislation to expand the legal and political benefits afforded to senior citizens.\textsuperscript{49} After reviewing minor, recently enacted legislation such as the Social Security amendments of 1961, Kennedy pressed the case once more for the need for hospital insurance through the Social Security system for older Americans.\textsuperscript{50} Alongside hospital insurance, Kennedy outlined several other areas in


\textsuperscript{50} The Kennedy administration continued the process begun under the Eisenhower administration of signing piecemeal amendments to the Social Security Act that gradually broadened and liberalized the program. For example, see John F. Kennedy: “Statement by the President Upon Signing the Social Security Amendments of 1961,” June 30, 1961. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8215 (Accessed September 13, 2016). The 1961 amendments to Social Security that Kennedy signed into law “provide[d] new or increased benefits to 4.4 million people, totaling some $800 million [1961 dollars] in the first year, with the increased costs being met through additional payroll taxes.” See “Legislative Summary: Social Security” at https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-
which he requested swift congressional action. These areas included targeted income tax reductions for older people, improved Social Security benefits, increased funding for federal efforts to assist older workers remain employed or secure new employment, and finally a new community action program designed to assist “State and local agencies and voluntary organizations for planning and developing services.” However, the press treated the President’s Special Message as a non-affair; instead, at Kennedy’s next press conference, the President fielded questions almost exclusively devoted to foreign affairs.

In addition to the lackadaisical response that greeted the President’s Special Message, the President’s Council on Aging, which the administration had organized a year earlier in order to demonstrate its commitment to the problems of older Americans, continued to meet irregularly and to produce recommendations, but its efforts appeared to be for naught. By late October 1963, Kennedy’s Council on Aging had churned out numerous reports, it appears that hardly anyone was taking heed of them, with the possible exceptions of Theodore Sorensen and Wilbur Cohen.

Despite this apparent neglect, though, the Council’s work was quietly reviving and drafting new recommendations designed to use the power of the federal government to assist older


53 See Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Departments and Agencies. Council on Aging. JFKL. The Council’s March 1963 meeting agenda appears to have been largely a reiteration of the President’s Special Message from the month before. In May 1963, the Council transmitted its first annual report to the President, and emphasized in its report that “the current major objective is hospital insurance under Social Security” as well as the need for “increased high quality nursing homes; food and drug protection; a tax program that will benefit older taxpayers who are employed thus providing an incentive for them to remain gainfully employed.” The Council’s report also suggested that “the Federal Government can assume a significant leadership role...in stimulating community action.” See Myer Feldman to John F. Kennedy, “Memorandum for the President: Meeting with the President's Council on Aging,” May 17, 1963 in Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Departments and Agencies. Council on Aging, JFKL.
Americans that would shape the federal government’s efforts over the course of the next decade. Specifically, the Council’s sixteen main recommendations included a broad list of proposals, such as improvements to subsidized housing, Social Security, and nursing homes, as well as new recommendations designed to prevent age discrimination in the workplace and to assist displaced older workers who had become unemployed due to unspecified “economic shifts.” The report also emphasized how these objectives could be realized by using existing federal laws and mechanisms rather than via securing congressional enactment of proposed legislation, an approach that had proven to be far more difficult and fruitless than the administration had originally anticipated. The Council’s recommendations therefore tended to rely upon powers vested in the President and the various Executive Branch agencies.

**Searching for a Focal Point**

The Council’s report also recognized the claims that Michael Harrington had made in *The Other America* about the persistence of old-age poverty in the United States. As Harrington had argued, it could not be honestly said in the early 1960s that the Social Security system had achieved its true potential of eradicating poverty among older Americans, especially since the poverty rate for Americans over the age of 65 still hovered between twenty-five and thirty percent.

Recognition of the growing inadequacies of the Social Security system, which Harrington had highlighted, was not limited solely to the Kennedy administration. In particular, the Senate’s

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54 Ibid., 2-9.
55 The report emphasized manpower retraining and development, or put more simply it recommended that the federal government find ways to help older workers become more employable rather than simply accept that they represented an excess supply of labor. The Labor Department undertook this particular assignment with considerable gusto, and would battle with HEW for control of this policy area.
56 Harrington’s arguments about the persistence of elderly poverty in the United States highlighted concerns that had been mounting within the private social welfare community for several years. In 1961, for example, Geneva Mathiasen, the Executive Secretary of the National Council on Aging, had argued that services and assistance for the elderly remained “spotty,” though she struck a more optimistic tone about the prospects for future improvements and progress in this area than Harrington would in *The Other America*. See Dorothy B. Barclay, “Problems of the Aged Still Unsolved,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 1961.
Special Committee on Aging remained busy building the case for a more sustained federal presence
in funding and promoting the creation of programs designed to deal with the problems of older
Americans. Originally, some more liberal members of the Senate’s Democratic caucus had intended
the Special Committee on Aging to be a tool for publicly applying political pressure on the
Eisenhower administration during the late 1950s to enact health insurance for the elderly through
the Social Security system.

After the end of the Eisenhower administration, the committee held a series of hearings in
1961 and again in 1962 across the nation that revealed a rising groundswell of concern among older
Americans, who repeatedly pleaded with committee members for the federal government to address
both health care and other issues like unemployment.58 As a 1963 Special Committee report argued,

despite the oft-expressed concern of the Nation as a whole, the
executive branch of our Government, even through changes of
administration, has dragged its feet for over a decade and still refuses
to create an agency that can give full time and attention to the broad
range of interrelated needs and potentials of older people.59

After the Committee’s nationwide hearings as well as the popular tumult that had surrounded the
Kennedy administration’s push for the enactment of Medicare, the Senate Special Committee on
Aging’s members came to believe that there was a sufficient deep reservoir of popular demand for
more federal action. Accordingly, they began publicly to demand the creation of a new federal
agency for the sole purpose of addressing the economic and social concerns of older Americans. In
the words of one Special Committee on Aging report released in early 1963,

58 The Special Committee held hearings throughout the nation in 1959-1961, which drew large crowds of senior citizens
who were concerned about rising medical and hospitalization costs. See Milton Honig, “Senate Hearings on the Elderly

the experience of the past decade, culminating in the White House Conference on Aging in January 1961, has clearly indicated the need for a focal point within the Federal Government for providing information, guidance, and support to the rapidly growing number of agencies and organizations eager to shoulder part of the responsibility.60

As conceived by the Senate Special Committee on Aging, this “focal point” agency would allow the Federal government to more effectively “share in the responsibility” with individual states and local communities. This shared responsibility was necessary, in the view of the Committee, because while many of those subnational levels of government had expressed interest in or had taken steps towards creating programs for their older residents, their programs and approaches remained on the whole “spotty, often inadequately conceived, and generally undernourished.”61

Moreover, the committee argued that there existed “ample evidence of the desire of the States and communities to carry out their vital roles in this partnership,” but that “effective performance of their roles…is dependent on effective performance of those functions which are the responsibility of the Federal partner.”62 In other words, the committee argued that the time was opportune for a “Federal partner” to intervene and assist the states and local communities, lest the “variety of approaches and programs developed” multiply beyond any reasonable or recognizable limit to organize and coordinate them. All that was lacking was the leadership necessary to bring a “Federal partner” into being.

Of course, as the committee was also aware, there were other factors to consider. The Eisenhower and then the Kennedy administrations had each attempted to coordinate the federal government’s activities on programs for older Americans. In its report, the committee highlighted the real barrier to effective progress: namely, the lack of cooperation among feuding agencies and

60 Ibid., 164.
61 Ibid., 163.
62 Ibid.
departments within the Executive Branch. Observing that the task of coordinating federal activities had previously been “left up to the coequal agencies involved” and that “no one agency is willing to release a shred of its authority to the others,” the committee strongly lambasted the “repeatedly undertaken pretense of resolving such difficulties in bringing together the Secretaries of the various departments in a Federal Council on Aging or a Presidential Council on Aging” as “having been, are, and always will be meaningless.”

“It is absurd,” the committee concluded, “to expect that key officials in existing agencies with sufficient authority and prestige to give leadership and continuing support to the effort needed to the effort needed can devote attention to such a task.” Rather, the committee observed, “quite naturally, but unfortunately for the aged, they have other weighty and statutory responsibilities which preclude more than occasional and tangential personal involvement in the field of aging.”

The only solution, therefore, was to create a new agency that would be responsible for Federal efforts. Existing programs and initiatives would be reassigned to the new agency, which would have the effect of establishing a dedicated office staffed by trained experts who could administer programs and coordinate with state and local officials with far less interference from other executive branch agencies eager to guard their bureaucratic turf.

Such a plan, though, met with a studied lack of interest on the part of the Kennedy administration. Despite Congressman John Fogarty and Senator Patrick McNamara’s repeated pleas, the administration largely ignored them, and offered little or no support to help win passage of legislation that would achieve the goal of creating a new federal agency dedicated to the problems of older Americans. Instead, the Kennedy administration continued to focus on securing passage of

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 164-165.
Medicare, a legislative goal that it shared with Fogarty and McNamara, and one that promised to win the administration plaudits (and votes).

Consequently, though Fogarty and McNamara would introduce legislation in Congress in 1963 to achieve the goal of creating a dedicated federal agency to coordinate efforts with state and local governments, that legislation ultimately did not advance beyond Capitol Hill. The failure of the Fogarty-McNamara legislation found its complement in the legislative impasse between the Kennedy administration and Congressman Wilbur Mills over Medicare. Ultimately, the only victory the Kennedy administration could claim by mid-1963 on the legislative front for old-age health insurance were a series of minor new amendments to the Social Security Act that were not radically different from those enacted during the Eisenhower administration. The battle over Medicare would continue well past Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963; so, too, would the efforts of Fogarty and McNamara to put the senior state on a firmer footing.66

From Kennedy to Johnson

The unlikely sequence of events that catapulted Lyndon Johnson to the presidency in 1963 would also dramatically reshape the political fortunes of social reformers who sought to use the federal government’s wallet and muscle to strengthen and build up a much broader welfare state for older Americans. As in so many other areas of American domestic policy, the Johnson administration’s efforts to strengthen and build up the senior state between 1964 and 1968 represented an unprecedented expansion of the federal government’s role in areas of social welfare policy that had long been primarily the concern of local and state governments. Before 1964, the federal-level senior state resided primarily within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

and the Social Security Board. At the state and local level, it had been significantly uneven; in some states like California and New York, a well-developed apparatus of public and private welfare officials had come into being and had pursued the creation of new programs and initiatives designed to secure not only the economic but also the social well-being of older people.67

New York and California were exceptions. Before the renewed emphasis on anti-poverty programs in the 1960s, the federal government’s role had been largely limited to providing matching funds under Social Security’s old-age assistance program and to ensuring the regular payment of Social Security benefits under the program’s old-age insurance program. While these expenditures were significant, especially those of the Social Security old-age assistance program before reforms in the late 1940s and into the 1950s shifted the balance of enrollees towards its old-age insurance program, the federal government’s efforts had aimed primarily at enhancing the economic security of older people.

In the 1960s, though, these efforts began to broaden significantly to include not only economic security but also the health and social well-being of older people, with federal officials frequently turning to state and local officials for inspiration and example. While much of the scholarship of this period has traditionally emphasized the Johnson administration’s achievements in getting Medicare and Medicaid enacted, these two important laws formed only part of the Johnson administration’s legislative agenda for older Americans. In addition to Medicare and Medicaid, the Johnson administration secured passage of several other measures, such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and the Older Americans Act, both of which found their way

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from chicken scratch scribbles on coffee-stained yellow legal pads into the bold, crisp, confident legal font of enacted legislation.  

Securing passage of this broad agenda remained tentative in late 1963. Over Christmas 1963, Lyndon Johnson huddled down with his family and chief aides at his ranch in rural Texas. Keenly aware that the near-unanimous national goodwill that had been showered upon him in the aftermath of President Kennedy’s assassination would not last, Johnson was determined to formulate a legislative strategy for the coming congressional session that would show that he did not intend to be a mere caretaker president until the 1964 presidential election. He turned to his characteristic methods of sly persuasion and domineering coercion in order to ensure that his aides would produce a plan for giving form to the still largely nebulous war on poverty that had existed primarily on paper for much of the last year of the Kennedy administration. The task facing Johnson’s aides was therefore to translate words into actionable items. As senior Johnson aide Jack Valenti later recalled,

[d]uring the Christmas holidays at the [LBJ] Ranch in 1963, [President Johnson] closeted Kermit Gordon, Walter Heller, Bill Moyers and myself to his little guest house…and he said, “We’re going to abolish poverty in this country, and I’m going to lock this door and you guys can’t come out until you bring me a plan to do just that…So we labored and we labored and we came out. We didn’t have


69 As G. Calvin MacKenzie and Robert Weisbrot relate, poverty as an issue had come more clearly into focus in the Kennedy administration after the publication of Michael Harrington’s The Other America. Walter Heller, Kennedy’s appointed Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, “regarded poverty as an economic problem, the mitigation of which would come through improved economic conditions. In a year-end discussion of economic issues in 1962, Kennedy urged Heller to proceed with an analysis of poverty and to develop a poverty response.” Heller and fellow economist Robert Lampman “struggled to come up with a consensual definition of poverty and to develop program initiatives. (MacKenzie and Weisbrot, The Liberal Hour, 91). Similarly, Wilbur Cohen in an oral history interview for the John F. Kennedy Library recalled that “The idea of the War on Poverty was developed so much more by Walter Heller through the Council of Economic Advisers, with the input of the Bureau of the Budget on the Community Action Program growing out of Paul Ylvisaker’s [Paul N. Ylvisaker] ideas, and then with the later input of Sundquist [James L. Sundquist] and Yarmolinsky [Adam Yarmolinsky] and Moynihan [Daniel Patrick Moynihan].” Wilbur Cohen, Oral History Interview #3, July 20, 1972, page 104, Oral History Collection, JFKL.
the details but we had a cause, and we had a plan, and we had a name, “The War on Poverty.”

While Johnson took such unusual steps to compel his aides to devise a more coherent plan to tackle poverty in the United States, the War on Poverty really began to take a more concrete form with the public release of the 1964 Economic Report of the President in late January 1964. The Economic Report conceded the difficulties inherent in defining both “poverty” and “the poor,” but ultimately argued that while “measurement of poverty is not simple, either conceptually or in practice,” by the poor “we mean those who are not now maintaining a decent standard of living – those whose basic needs exceed their means to satisfy them.” Insofar as establishing what exactly a “decent standard of living” was, the Economic Report relied upon statistics provided by the Social Security Administration which defined a “low-cost budget for a nonfarm family of four…in 1962 to have been $3,955 [approximately $31,657 in 2016 dollars].” After taking these statistics as well as various other sources into account, the Report concluded that the actual poverty line stood at roughly $3,000 in annual money income, or approximately $60 per week (both figures in 1962 dollars). Using this metric to define the poor and poverty, the Economic Report concluded that

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70 Mark K. Updegrove, *Indomitable Will: LBJ in the Presidency.* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 147. Originally cited in Robert L. Hardesty, *The Johnson Years: The Difference He Made.* (Austin: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, 1993), 20. Heller, an academic economist at the University of Minnesota, had long been interested in the relationship between economic policy and poverty. Long before the “war on poverty” had entered the nation’s lexicon, Heller had been predicting that the country’s sustained economic growth would still prove to be insufficient to reduce poverty, especially for groups that were being bypassed by that growth such as the elderly, racial minorities, less educated workers, and households headed by women. See Emma Harrison, “’78 Gross Product of Trillion Seen,” *The New York Times,* June 7, 1960.


72 Ibid., 57.

73 Ibid., 58.
approximately “one-third of all poor families are headed by a person over 65, and almost one-half of all families headed by such a person are poor.”

In response to the Economic Report’s findings, the Johnson administration proposed the enactment of a broad tax cut, which it hoped would stimulate further economic growth sufficient to raise impoverished families out of poverty. While this policy solution promised to lower taxes on the nation’s upper and middle classes, it had less to offer older people living on fixed incomes who already paid a low amount of federal income tax. Additionally, the Economic Report stressed the importance of enacting health insurance through Social Security as “the first order of business” for the aged, but did not offer much substance in terms of what the second, third, and subsequent terms would be. Prior to 1964, the pattern of previous administrations had been to broaden Social Security’s old age insurance provisions. But these moves to strengthen Social Security had limits. The old-age insurance system’s actuarial math was based on the principle that benefits paid out should be correlated to earnings contributed into the system. As a result, millions of elderly people – especially elderly women – who had not “worked” in the sense of participating in compensated employment remained unprotected by Social Security’s old age insurance system.

Furthermore, while Social Security’s old-age assistance program remained in operation, it still varied widely from state-to-state, with some states paying benefits as high as $95 per month (1962 dollars) and others dispensing far less (in some states, the figure was as low as $37 per month). While conceding that there were potentially other sources of monetary support such as private pensions and private in-kind income transfers within and between families, the Economic Report argued that “families with a history of low earnings are also likely to have little of such

74 Ibid., 57. The Department of Commerce and the President’s Council of Economic Advisers estimated that 47% of families headed by someone over the age of 65 lived below the poverty line, though that figure was still lower than it had been in 1947, when approximately 56% of such families lived below the poverty line. See Ibid., 65.
75 Ibid., 17.
76 Ibid., 69.
supplementary income” and that these alternative sources of support would be insufficient for most poorer families.\textsuperscript{77}

Despite recognizing these limitations, the Economic Report ultimately concluded that “high employment and vigorous economic growth are still of major importance for this group,” though it did not explain how achieving high employment and sustained economic growth would lead to a reduction in poverty for older people, especially those who were not able to return to the active workforce. The Report did highlight the need for “continued long-run improvement of social insurance benefits, along with expanded programs to cover hospital-related costs for the aged” and “augmented construction of housing to meet the particular needs of the aged” as “necessary steps in a continuing campaign against poverty.” Overall, though, it was not radically different in substance (save for its embrace of Medicare) from the policy proposals that had been tossed around Washington since the Truman-era National Conference on Aging.

\textbf{“Our Society Can Well Afford the Funds Involved”}

While the Johnson administration’s public commitment to eradicating poverty was a historic breakthrough, on the issue of elderly poverty, it remained committed to strengthening the hybrid federal-state approach that had developed during the course of the previous decade.\textsuperscript{78} This cautious

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} The emerging architecture of the Johnson administration’s approach to the social and economic problems of older people reflected many of the assumptions inherited from the 1950 National Conference on Aging, starting with the emphasis on action at the local level and coordination between the different levels of government and voluntary organizations to successfully implement and administer needed services and programs. In the words of a 1964 staff paper prepared by HEW Under Secretary Wilbur Cohen and Dr. Donald Kent, the latter then on loan to the Johnson administration from the University of Connecticut, “the vast array of services necessary for older persons requires a broad partnership of local, State, and Federal governments and voluntary organizations. It is to the community particularly, to which all programs must be oriented – here where the older person is a consumer, worker, homeowner, taxpayer, parent, neighbor. Only services available where he lives and made known to him and his family have utility for the older person.” Cohen and Kent therefore predicted that by 1975, “we will see at every level of government and in every community, effective organizations for planning and coordination of services to older persons and for the provision of counseling information and referral services – so that every older person will know where to turn for help if he stands in the need for help.” See “Programs for Older People by 1975,” prepared by Wilbur Cohen and Dr. Donald Kent, n.d. [1964?], in Box 196, White House Central Files, Oversize Attachments #1749, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter “LBJL”).
approach reflected the administration’s desire to build on issues for which there was already a broad political consensus rather than risk alienating potential allies. Evidence of the relatively uncontroversial nature of using the federal government’s vast toolbox to address the issue of elderly poverty had presented itself in January 1964 during a hearing convened by the U.S. Senate’s Special Committee on Aging in which multiple public and private welfare officials repeatedly pleaded for an increased federal role in provisioning services for the elderly. While acknowledging that the federal government had not remained entirely aloof from the needs of state and local welfare agencies, federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare officials pointed out that more action could be taken. In the words of Dr. Ellen Winston, the U.S. Commissioner of Welfare and a former North Carolina state welfare official,

[t]he Federal Government has done and is now doing much to assist States and localities with respect to the aging. We have a strong pattern of relationships from the Office of Aging to State and local groups. We have reached a point, however, where further significant advances require new legislation and grants-in-aid. Several bills are now before Congress which could provide stimulus to an advance by States and localities along a broad front. Our society can well afford the funds involved.79

Dr. Winston further testified that the federal government had established contacts with the thirty-seven states that had statewide commissions or committees on aging as well as the more than eight hundred cities and counties that had similarly established planning and coordinating committees on aging. However, as she stressed in her testimony, only twenty-eight states “have an appropriation, but the range in this appropriation is very great, from really a token contribution on the part of the

State to a sufficient appropriation to have a reasonable staff,” an issue that also bedeviled numerous local-level committees dedicated to addressing the issues of older people.80

In essence, despite the growing number of state and local level governments that had begun to provide services to the elderly, the fact remained, in the words of Dr. Winston, that “the availability of services to the elderly is spread unevenly throughout the country. More plans and programs are on paper than in practice.”81 Dr. Winston’s testimony neatly encapsulated the approach that the Johnson administration would undertake in its war against elderly poverty over the course of the next several years. Working in partnership with existing state and local agencies, the federal government would try to bolster these lower-level offices, and would seek to equalize the availability of services throughout the nation by setting up new agencies in state or localities that desired them. Sustained economic prosperity would underwrite these efforts; all that was required on the part of the federal government was for Congress to appropriate the necessary funds.82

As Dr. Winston had argued in her testimony, the most helpful role that the federal government could play in the realm of old-age economic and social support would be to provide more ample funding to the states and localities which lacked sufficient monies to maintain their own state and local agencies.83 Testifying after Dr. Winston before the assembled senators, William Fitch, the Executive Director of the AARP, echoed many of her observations, and stressed the need

80 Ibid., 4.
82 Dr. Winston believed that the Johnson administration’s efforts in this field to provide adequate funding to state programs and to seek out more partnerships with private social welfare agencies offered a rare opportunity to “restructure and strengthen our welfare services.” See Address of Dr. Ellen Winston, presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Services, Washington, D.C., May 16, 1966, pgs. 5-6. Available at: http://www.bjpa.org/publications/downloadFile.cfm?FileID=4717 (Accessed March 10, 2017).
for Congress to enact the proposed Older Americans Act, a reworked version of the legislation originally proposed by Congressman Fogarty and Senator McNamara that had met with lukewarm support by the Kennedy administration in 1963.\textsuperscript{84} Echoing President Johnson’s recent declaration of an unconditional war against poverty in his January 1964 State of the Union Address, Fitch connected the nascent War on Poverty to the AARP’s efforts to promote voluntary self-sufficiency among senior citizens:

The Older Americans Act…offers great promise of assistance in the development of new or improved programs to help older persons through grants for community planning and services for training, through research or training project grants. The bill would also establish…an operating agency to be designated as the “Administration for Aging”…[that] would separate the programs on aging out of the welfare setting in which they are presently considered. It is urgent that, as we are asked to “pursue poverty wherever it exists,” we must distinguish between the elderly who are independent and self-sufficient and those who are in need of public welfare.\textsuperscript{85}

As Fitch continued, “the Older Americans Act makes possible a balanced program in aging to enable our older people to secure equal opportunity, to the full and free enjoyment of income, health, housing, employment, and the pursuit of meaningful activity.”\textsuperscript{86} Aside from his support for the Older Americans Act, Fitch’s testimony also suggested how the AARP and other similarly-minded voluntary organizations viewed themselves as essential actors in the emerging relationship between federal, state, and local officials to deal with the problems of older Americans. While conceding that government at all levels had an important role to play, Fitch noted that

\[\text{[i]t is not possible [n]or would it be desirable to separate the responsibility of the Federal, State, and community services from the role of older persons themselves. Each has a vital part to play and the need for a coordinated approach is the challenge to every force working in the best interest of older persons…I pledge to your}\]

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 41.  
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 41.  
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
committee the support of our members in implementing the findings of your committee and in the creation of programs that will place the needs of older Americans in proper perspective to make the later years truly a period of reward and achievement.⁸⁷

Fitch and Winston’s respective testimonies found a receptive audience with the Senate’s Special Committee on Aging. When the Committee released its report in September 1964 on the need for “establishing and expanding public and private services for our senior citizens,” it placed the “enactment of an authorization to provide financial assistance for statewide and community planning and coordination of programs in the field of aging” as its top recommendation, and urged the enactment of the Older Americans Act.⁸⁸

That recommendation, though, like the other fourteen that the Committee eventually made, proceeded to languish. The Johnson administration remained uninterested in rocking the boat until after the November 1964 presidential election, and even a relatively uncontroversial law like the Older Americans Act remained a low legislative priority. The Older Americans Act as proposed in 1963 therefore died a quiet death, though it was clear that a broad consensus of private and public welfare officials would support similar legislation if it was reintroduced in the new Congress set to convene in January 1965.⁸⁹

A few weeks before the November 1964 election, Johnson aide Frederick Panzer was busy preparing a memorandum documenting the administration’s “accomplishments in the field of aging since 22 November 1963.”⁹⁰ The list of accomplishments Panzer collected, though, was relatively thin and perfunctory, and amounted to page or two at best of minor Social Security amendments and

⁸⁷ Ibid., 41-42.
⁹⁰ “Accomplishments in the Field of Aging Since 22 November 1963,” October 12, 1964, Box 521, Office Files of Frederick Panzer, LBJL.
other related legislation. In light of this relatively slender record, Panzer drew attention in the memorandum to the still largely untouched list of objectives that the 1961 White House Conference on Aging had assembled and not too subtly hinted that, if the President or the Democratic Party were in need of campaign issues for the 1964 election, the White House Conference on Aging’s recommendations might prove to be a good starting point.91

Eager to distinguish themselves from the Eisenhower administration’s record (one internal memorandum described the Eisenhower years as a period when “the Government [was] lying down on the job”), Johnson administration officials took stock of the nearly twenty recommendations made by the 1961 White House Conference on Aging. Viewed as a whole, the recommendations were broad, wide-ranging, even ambitious: the federal government could help senior citizens to secure the “right to freedom from want in old age” by encouraging the development of sufficient health insurance coverage and Social Security, old-age assistance, and other pension programs capable of “provide[ing] adequate minimum income in old age related to changing economic conditions.”92 Other, more prosaic recommendations emphasized the need to guarantee the elderly “the right to a fair share of the community’s recreational, educational, and medical resources” as well as “the right to live with dignity.”93

But there was another reason for the administration’s growing concern with the elderly. As a 1964 Department of Health Education and Welfare Research Division report argued in language reminiscent of The Other America, “the old and the frail have also been bypassed – given enough of the fruits of progress to prolong their lives, but deprived of opportunities to fill the added years with

91 Mark Sheehan, “Senior Citizens” – Speech Section, May 28, 1964, Box 521, Office Files of Frederick Panzer, LBJL.
92 “The Rights of Senior Citizens and Major Recommendations of the White House Conference on Aging,” [n.d.] Box 521, Office Files of Frederick Panzer, LBJL.
93 Ibid., 2-3.
satisfactions...having no real role in the modern economy, all these people enjoy few of its assets.”\textsuperscript{94}

In other words, the federal government could help to carve out a “real role in the modern economy” for older people, and if it so chose, the 1961 White House Conference on Aging’s recommendations offered a blueprint to do so. As the same HEW report optimistically concluded, the last several years have witnessed emphasis on Federal legislation to help people overcome social, health, educational, and other problems which keep them from becoming self-sufficient...all of these Federal activities are designed to help communities develop coordinated programs, using their local social institutions to supplement and reinforce the effort individuals can make to find their way into the mainstream of American life.\textsuperscript{95}

The message was clear: now was the time to act. The effort to alleviate poverty, especially among the “old and frail” had languished for too long. By undertaking methods both novel and known, the Johnson administration could launch a full-scale assault on elderly poverty in the United States. The necessary resources were present to do so. The question remained how best to achieve this goal. Assuming that legislation providing medical care for the elderly was enacted into law, what other areas of life for older Americans should the government place its emphasis upon? Issues like housing, guaranteed basic income security, as well as fair and equitable access to the workplace all seemed to be equally compelling options, and as 1964 and 1965 unfolded, it became clear that the administration meant to take on all of them in some fashion or another.

Senator Barry Goldwater’s overwhelming defeat in the 1964 presidential election handed liberals within the Democratic Party a working majority on Capitol Hill, and the Johnson


\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 68.
administration was determined to utilize this rare window of opportunity. The ability of Congressman Wilbur Mills and other conservative southern Democrats to block the administration’s way was, at least for the moment, halted. As a supreme micromanager, Johnson took an interest in nearly every domestic policy initiative of his administration. Perhaps no issue in 1964 and 1965 – aside from civil rights – occupied as privileged a position on the President’s crowded schedule as the struggle to enact medical care for older Americans. As Johnson aide Jack Valenti recalled, Johnson had once exclaimed that

“I’m going to make Harry Truman’s dream come true. Old folks are not going to be barred from a doctor’s office or a hospital because they don’t have any money for medical attention. They are never again going to have to be sick and hurt and cry alone. It’s a goddamned crime,” he said, “we’re never going to have that happen again in this country. When this bill is passed, I’m going to Independence, [Missouri] and I’m going to sign it in Harry Truman’s presence.” He did exactly that.96

Of course, Medicare did not begin or end with Johnson’s personal desire to make former President Harry Truman happy. The enactment of Medicare in 1965 represented a long-stalled and partial triumph for political liberals that they passionately savored in light of the AMA’s hitherto successful efforts to block any such legislation.

While Medicare was probably the most important piece of social legislation enacted in the United States since the original Social Security Act in 1935, it represented but one piece of an emerging policy agenda that the Johnson administration believed was necessary to buttress the economic and health security of older Americans. This emerging policy agenda had its origins in the efforts of transplanted officials from the organized labor movement like Charles Odell and James O’Brien, who had served on the 1960 Kennedy campaign’s “Board of Senior Citizens for Kennedy.” This reliance on organized labor as a source of ideas for social policy was perfectly in keeping for the Johnson administration.\(^\text{97}\) In the case of the “Board of Senior Citizens for Kennedy,” its eventual evolution into the National Council of Senior Citizens, an AFL-CIO aligned and funded organization was done primarily for one reason: to educate and persuade senior citizens to support the enactment of Medicare. The enactment of Medicare thereby presented something of a quandary

\(^{97}\) As Joshua Freeman has observed, “organized labor played a central role in the Great Society. Unions enthusiastically endorsed Johnson in 1964 and lobbied hard for his legislative program. Labor officials even helped draft some Great Society proposals and in several instances left their posts to take positions in the Johnson administration.” See Freeman, *American Empire*, 213. For contemporary coverage, see “War on Poverty Pressed by Labor,” The New York Times, February 23, 1964.
for both the National Council of Senior Citizens and the Johnson administration, since that
crowning legislative victory also took off the table an issue which had singlehandedly come to
dominate discussions at the local, state, and federal levels of government over how to assist older
Americans.

The OEO and the War on Elderly Poverty

The future direction of federal initiatives to assist the aged was also opaque, courtesy of the
administration’s War on Poverty, a major initiative that had begun under highly improvised
circumstances. Reflecting Johnson’s preference for speedy implementation and action, the
bureaucratic contours of the War on Poverty came together quickly over the early months of 1964.98
James C. Gaither, a former Special Assistant to President Johnson, remembered that “OEO was set
up really without a program, [but with] a very ambitious goal, and a charter to go out and innovate
and experiment and see if somehow we could provide an opportunity and give people a chance to
escape poverty”99  As Gaither further observed, the OEO’s ambitious mandate of eliminating
poverty immediately confronted a major philosophical issue: namely, what, in fact, was poverty?
Who were the poor, and how they best be helped? Broadly speaking, Johnson and his aides were
deeply influenced by broadly shared ideas about poverty in the 1960s, which held that

poverty...once thought of as largely a problem of exploitation at the
workplace, increasingly had come to be seen as an issue of economic
and social marginalization, of exclusion from work...Lyndon Johnson

98 As Martha J. Bailey and Nicolas J. Duquette observe, “in the seven weeks between Kennedy’s assassination and
Johnson’s State of the Union debut, the ‘War on Poverty’ grew from a small, academic pilot program of the CEA
[Council of Economic Advisers] to a core agenda of Johnson’s presidency. Martha J. Bailey and Nicolas J. Duquette,
“How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty: The Economics and Politics of Funding at the Office of Economic
January 2014.

[1996]. For contemporary coverage of the War on Poverty, see Marjorie Hunter, “To Help the Poor,” The New York
believed that the plight of the poor could be and should be ameliorated, without taking anything away from those better off.¹⁰⁰

This conceptual abstraction of poverty worked reasonably well at first in what the historian Randall Woods has labeled the “Johnsonian world,” in which “enemies were abstract – disease, ignorance, racism – [and] not concrete – economic royalists, segregationists, doctors, the ‘Upper Ten’, radical immigrants.”¹⁰¹

This nebulous concept of poverty would create problems as the War on Poverty progressed, as critics on both the right and left of the administration questioned the effectiveness of its methods and the rationale behind its assumptions. Rather than untangle the full ideological dimensions of poverty in America, the Johnson administration instead opted to bolster existing social services infrastructure and to fund the creation of new initiatives. Indeed, Johnson’s main ideological contribution to the War on Poverty, now taking shape as the newly formed Office of Economic Opportunity, or OEO, was his insistence that “there be no doles”, and newly appointed OEO director Sargent Shriver concurred in this belief. Shriver rushed to put together a working staff for the new agency, a process both helped and hindered by its newness.

Strikingly, the OEO was designed mainly to bypass the established infrastructure of social workers and welfare administrators and to work directly with local communities in the hope that its initiatives would not get caught in the thicket of local politics.¹⁰² The 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, which authorized and funded the OEO, thereby “allowed tremendous federal discretionary

¹⁰⁰ Freeman, American Empire, 202. G. Calvin MacKenzie and Robert Weisbrot observe that the federal government handled the issue of poverty “not as an agent of the American people responding to their demands, but as an independent force seeking to solve problems that its experts had identified and to which they had applied the tools of modern analysis.” (MacKenzie and Weisbrot, The Liberal Hour, 97).

¹⁰¹ Woods, Prisoners of Hope, 10.

¹⁰² Ibid., 4. As Martha Bailey and Nicolas Duquette note, “in contrast to state governors, local government had no power in the original EOA [Economic Opportunity Act].” (Ibid., 7). As Landon Storrs has pointed out, bypassing local and state officials eventually exacted a heavy toll on the ability of OEO to successfully prosecute the War on Poverty. In particular, Elizabeth Wickenden (or “Wicky” to her close friends), a longtime social welfare policy consultant and confidante of Johnson, Cohen, and other key Great Society players “correctly predicted that OEO’s bypassing of local and state authorities would provoke a political backlash.” (Storrs, The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left, 250). Lyndon Johnson later lamented that “I should have listened to Wicky.” (Ibid., 250).
power over a meaningful amount of resources.” However, bypassing groups with a vested interest in their states and communities helped strengthen opposition to the War on Poverty as an unwarranted intrusion by the federal government into affairs beyond its constitutional purview.

In contrast to the OEO’s modus operandi, the model of partnership between all different levels of government that had come to mark the development and administration of government programs for older Americans ensured that, unlike the Community Action Programs (CAP) sponsored by the OEO, it did not suddenly disrupt pre-existing patterns of power and patronage in local governments. Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago may have viewed the OEO’s community action agencies as unwelcome meddlers in his political machine, but his highest city-level administrator for aging affairs was perhaps the most faithful and cooperative local official between New York and California that the Johnson administration could rely upon.

Many of these local officials had established working relationships with local philanthropic and private social welfare organizations as part of long-standing historical pattern of public-private cooperation that had preceded the enactment of Social Security in 1935. After the enactment of Social Security, the need to administer federal funds at the state-level had led many individual states to create state agencies, whose primary bailiwick remained the monthly disbursement of Social Security benefits as well as applicable state-based public assistance funds.

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104 As G. Calvin MacKenzie and Robert Weisbrot have observed, the “community action programs were problematic from the start” because they became “hotbeds of community activism” which “was threatening to local political leaders who saw the CAPs as alternative power structures in their own communities, funded and encouraged by the federal government…The ruckus CAP created was blown far out of proportion to the threat it actually posed, but the bad publicity dealt the War on Poverty a blow from which it never recovered” (MacKenzie and Weisbrot, The Liberal Hour, 102-103).
The expansion of Social Security during the 1940s and 1950s had expanded the size and scope of these agencies as more categories of workers became eligible for coverage under Social Security, and had the effect of “encourage[ing] state agencies to accept responsibility for providing or securing specific social services required by the needy aged.”\textsuperscript{106} Working in conjunction with these state level agencies were national welfare organizations like the American Public Welfare Association (APWA), that aimed to help those agencies develop a more robust set of social and community services designed to ensure satisfactory attention to the needs of older people.\textsuperscript{107} These needs were both economic and non-economic. In the words of the APWA,

in the future, public welfare will be increasingly concerned with a large number of people who are not in need of public assistance, such as beneficiaries of an adequate old age and survivors insurance or private insurance benefit...public welfare has a responsible role to assume in the provision of services to older people throughout the community having social service needs which may or may not include economic want.\textsuperscript{108}

The APWA’s words reflected an evolving consensus in the nation’s social welfare community. The needs of older people were no longer “simple and static;” rather, they were growing and dynamic. “Public assistance administration must not accept the belief that old people are always self-sufficient and that therefore...they do not need help in resolving social, economic, and psychological problems.”\textsuperscript{109}

These changing sentiments about the needs of older people in American society strongly undergirded and militated in favor of an expanding role for policymakers at all levels – local, state, and eventually federal – and the need to develop and expand social services for the elderly. Public and private welfare officials labored mightily to use the resources of the state to put in place new

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 15-16.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 17.
agencies, services, and initiatives that would replace or supplement the supporting roles traditionally played by families or by active employment in the labor force. As the National Council on the Aging (a daughter organization formed by members of the private National Social Welfare Assembly) noted in a 1962 report,

> [o]ne of the major personal and social problems of today is emerging from the number of years people spend in retirement without a work schedule to utilize the greater proportion of their time and without means to participate fully in the life of the community. Both the individual and society have yet to understand the significance of this situation and the enormous toll resulting from the community’s failure to utilize the potential of its older people.\footnote{The National Council on the Aging, “Toward a Better Life in the Later Years,” c. 1962, Online Archive of California, California and West Coast Labor and Industrial Relations, Selected Publications, Source URL: http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6pf/ (Accessed August 2, 2016).}

It was this “potential of…older people” that the National Council on the Aging (NCOA), in conjunction with other public and private welfare institutions, sought to direct into well-defined, socially useful functions like volunteer work.\footnote{The NCOA had originally been formed “at the request of community leaders, professional and civic groups, government agencies, and others who were attempting to deal unassisted with complex problems at the grass roots level…by 1960 the requests for service and special studies had far outgrown the resources to meet them. It thus became necessary to charter an independent, non-profit organization – the National Council on the Aging.” See The National Council on the Aging, “Toward a Better Life in the Later Years,” c. 1962, Online Archive of California, California and West Coast Labor and Industrial Relations, Selected Publications, Source URL: http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt2779q6pf/ (Accessed August 2, 2016).} In doing so, the NCOA sought to mitigate the large-scale effects of population shifts and changes in employment patterns, both of which it and other like-minded organizations such as APWA believed to be responsible for the worsening social and economic conditions faced by older Americans in many communities.

While neither the NCOA nor APWA sought to rewind the clock back to a more rural, less industrial past in which older people supposedly enjoyed higher social status, both believed firmly that solutions to the problems of older Americans could be discerned through careful research in the nation’s leading universities and then applied and implemented by policymakers throughout the
country. It was a fundamentally optimistic approach to the problems of older Americans, and NCOA embraced this approach with gusto. In the organization’s words,

NCOA must continue to exercise leadership by helping the young to understand and prepare for the later years; to promote sound relations among the four generations... It must continue to work with others to develop healthy attitudes on the part of the public towards aging... [and] to create... a climate in which age itself will be looked upon as a natural phenomenon, not as an economic, physical, and social disaster.¹¹²

A public-private infrastructure was already in place at the local and state levels and ready to receive funding for new programs and initiatives and to help federal officials identify new areas of concern. Thus, unlike many of the OEO’s antipoverty initiatives, some of the infrastructure needed for coordinated effort between local, state, and federal government already existed for some of the programs designed to assist older Americans. It existed in cities like New York and Chicago, and in some states like North Carolina and California, but it remained woefully underdeveloped in other places.

The administration’s approach therefore aimed to strengthen anti-poverty initiatives for the elderly where they already existed, and to scale successful local-level programs like subsidized public housing and access to social and rehabilitative services to the national level, all while promoting new demonstration and experimental projects in communities throughout the nation. In other words, the administration had committed itself to a hugely ambitious agenda, one that sought to enmesh the federal government in social welfare policymaking for older people to an extent that exceeded the expansion of the federal government’s role that had taken place during the New Deal.

This expansion of infrastructure at the state and local level before the advent of the Great Society drew its strength in part by changing ideas about the relative capacity of older people to

¹¹² Ibid.
remain productive workers and participants in the social life of their communities. Thirty years earlier, the Social Security Act had been enacted in order to promote the economic independence of older people by removing them as a financial burden upon either their families or their communities. In practice, though, it had frequently fallen short of this goal, mostly because its benefits had not kept pace with inflation and the rising cost of living.

Moreover, the inadequacy of Social Security had, during the postwar years, created a vacuum that was filled by private social welfare agencies eager to reassert their traditional role as the keystone of the American social welfare system, a role that they had lost due to the Great Depression. The resurgence of local and state-based assistance had created growing disparities in the levels of assistance that older people could expect to receive, with wealthier states like New York and California more willing to fund state-level government assistance programs that were considerably more slender in places like Louisiana and Mississippi.

The challenge facing the Johnson administration, therefore, was how to square the President’s insistence that there be no new “doles” created with the need to assist desperately impoverished communities that in some cases lacked even the semblance of a social welfare infrastructure. Rehabilitative and social service programs thereby provided a solution to this conundrum, because they were not simply another form of cash assistance like the old-age assistance payments made by Social Security or by individual state pension systems such as those of California or Colorado. Instead, the programs that the Johnson administration’s war on elderly poverty favored were ones that promoted the creation of employment opportunities, especially for younger members of traditionally disadvantaged communities.

**Manpower for Medicare**

While the enactment of Medicare in 1965 and its subsequent implementation in 1966 had the salutary effect of subsidizing the medical costs of many older Americans and thereby helped to keep
many of them out of near-certain poverty and off federal, state, and local public assistance rolls, it also had another, less well-known, consequence. In effect, by making it possible for older Americans to purchase and afford more medical care, the law led to a steadily growing demand for sufficient health care professionals to meet the heightened demand for medical care among the elderly. In July 1966, just a few weeks after Medicare went into effect, Dr. George A. Silver, a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health and Scientific Affairs, wrote to HEW Secretary John Gardner with regard to the need for a “long term health manpower program.” In his letter, Silver noted “while a policy discussion is still under way as to priorities and programs for long term alleviation of the health manpower shortage…an immediate effort to have a definite impact can be proposed.” In particular, Silver wrote that tabulations provided by the American Hospital Association showed that there was “a uniform grave shortage in the area of professional nurses: half of the demand overall…according to this about 100,000 people are required to meet the most urgent need; 50,000 professional nurses, country wide are needed.”

In response to this manpower shortage, Silver recommended that the administration act as quickly as possible by formally directing “the Public Health Service [to] undertake a program…of financing recruitment and refresher courses…for professional nurses and medical technologists

113 During the first year of Medicare’s operation, Johnson administration officials operated on educated guesswork to predict how Medicare would reshape the demand for medical services. As Dr. Philip R. Lee, the Assistant Secretary for Health and Scientific Affairs in HEW observed in a December 17th, 1966 memorandum to Joseph Califano, “health manpower shortages in extended care facilities and nursing homes are particularly acute. The present expanded health manpower program should, however, help meet the most urgent needs. The added demand for beds and services due to Medicare is difficult to estimate accurately. There will be about 70,000 Medicare beneficiaries in extended care facilities at any given time.” See Philip R. Lee to Joseph Califano, “Memorandum: Report of the Task Force on Nursing Homes and Other Institutions for the Care of the Elderly,” December 17, 1966, in Box 67, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.
114 George A. Silver, M.D. to John Gardner via Dr. Philip R. Lee, July 19, 1966, “A Program for Rapid Production of Needed Health Workers in Medical Care Institutions” in Box 19, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
estimated to draw 25,000 to 30,000 qualified people back into the field.” In addition, Silver recommended that the federal government should disburse $45 million in funds (approximately $334 million in 2016 dollars) to provide “practical nursing training, particularly in States designated as having the greater need.” These funds to provide for additional nursing training would represent a mere expansion of an existing arrangement between the American Hospital Association and the Johnson administration.

Besides these two major funding initiatives to support the training and recruitment of new health care professionals, Silver proposed four additional minor ones, which totaled $13.5 million (1966 dollars) and 14,500 new nurses’ aides, orderlies, laboratory assistants, medical record aides, and additional dietitian aides. Effectively, Silver recommended a broad spectrum of all the different types of workers who would be necessary to meet the increased demand for medical care. While Silver acknowledged that adequately funding all of these proposals might be a challenge, he urged Gardner to take advantage of the ample funds already allocated by Congress. In particular, Congress had attached significant funding to several pieces of legislation, including the Manpower Development and Training Act ($400 million in 1966 dollars), the Vocational Education Act ($200 million in 1966 dollars), as well as funds scheduled to be allocated to the Office of Economic Opportunity ($88 million in 1966 dollars).

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119 George A. Silver, M.D. to John Gardner via Dr. Philip R. Lee, July 19, 1966, “A Program for Rapid Production of Needed Health Workers in Medical Care Institutions” pg. 3, in Box 19, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.

120 Ibid., 3-4.

121 Ibid., 7.
Originally, Silver’s letter to Gardner had come after a frenzied exchange of letters between Sargent Shriver, the head of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), and Douglass Cater, a Special Assistant to President Johnson. Shriver had written to Cater at the end of May 1966 in an administratively confidential memorandum to highlight what he believed were the most effective ways to create jobs for the various impoverished constituencies that were now within the OEO’s bailiwick. 122 In particular, Shriver stressed to Cater the need for new public employment opportunities for the impoverished that “develop meaningful jobs with advancement potential for persons seeking economic opportunities” and which would simultaneously “expand services in areas of public need through the innovative use of non-professional personnel.” 123 Significantly, Shriver argued “one may think of the many ‘new careers’ (e.g., home health aides) that can be developed in the health field in response to the growing public needs arising from the Medicare program” as an example of this virtuous cycle, lest the connection between Medicare and OEO’s efforts be lost. 124 Shriver reasoned that the enactment of Medicare and the consequently heightened demand for trained health care professionals presented a perfect opportunity to wage both the war on poverty and the fight for better health care. As he further noted in his letter to Cater, “the special capabilities of public employment” included

…[the] ability to practice nondiscriminatory hiring and promotion practices without fear of economic consequences…to provide an entry-point into the mainstream of economic participation for the poor. This involves a temporarily sheltered and supportive work environment within which the poor can develop and prove their ability to earn an adequate income, [and]…to expand badly needed services in the public sector in those areas in which highly trained professional personnel are in short supply. 125

122 Sargent Shriver to Douglass S. Cater, May 31, 1966, in Box 19, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 1.
125 Ibid.
While Shriver conceded in the memorandum that “it is not expected that all of the long-term unemployed will want public employment jobs” he underscored that “others both within and outside the labor force will find these jobs attractive as they will represent a means of upward mobility for them.” 126 Shriver ended his memorandum by observing that “the estimated cost of a public employment program for 180,000 people is $720 million (1966 dollars).”127 Perhaps realizing that OEO was unlikely to receive that level of funding, Shriver conceded that “we believe…that a program having considerable impact could be started at one-fourth to one-third the 180,000 level…at levels of 45,000-60,000, the program would cost from $180-$240 million (1966 dollars).”128

The Older Americans Act

Shriver’s concession did not deter congressional critics of the War on Poverty, who increasingly believed that the OEO had a far too narrow conception of poverty, and that its efforts were therefore ignoring impoverished communities that deserved more attention. Such concerns bolstered the efforts by congressional Democrats to enact new legislation that would specifically address the issue of elderly poverty, an issue that Michael Harrington and others had helped to resuscitate as a public concern during the early 1960s. Picking up on this groundswell of interest, a May 1965 article in the New York Times stated “this is the age of the aged,” and intoned that

[t]he most visible group of Americans today is the aged…there are more than 18,000,000 men and women in the United States who are 65 years old or older…Eight hundred persons a day are added to the separate, the often frightening world of the aged. The aged have no economic status. The aged have no household status…And their special problem is survival in a society that finds their minds and bodies superfluous.129

126 Ibid., 3.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 4.
Before taking readers on a tour through the potential trail of horrors that old age seemingly had to offer them, though, the *Times* drew attention to the efforts of Congressman John Fogarty (D-RI) to temper the seemingly harsh attitude of American society towards elderly people by enacting the Older Americans Act. Reflecting on previous attempts to enact the Older Americans Act, Fogarty commented that

> I’ve been involved in legislation for the aging for the past 14 years here in the House. We’ve got a President’s Council on Aging; we’ve got an Office of Aging in the Health, Education and Welfare Department; we’ve got a mountain of paper on old people and somehow we haven’t been able to bring the mountain of paper to the old people. Maybe this bill [the Older Americans Act] will do it. I hope so. Because the whole problem of aging is something that shouldn’t be a problem.\textsuperscript{130} 

Of course, neither Fogarty nor his Senate co-sponsor Patrick McNamara of Michigan believed that the “whole problem of aging” would be changed by the passage of a single law, but their proposed legislation nevertheless aimed high in its stated goals. Similar to the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act’s funding for programs primarily designed to assist unemployed young men, the Older Americans Act proposed the authorization of “$13,000,000 in grants to the states for community planning, demonstration programs and the training of personnel.”\textsuperscript{131} As Congressman Fogarty added, the bill’s declaration of objectives for older Americans included federal assurances of “an adequate income,” “the best possible physical and mental health,” “suitable housing,” and “opportunity for employment with age discrimination.”\textsuperscript{132}

Sensing the power of the popular groundswell that had helped carry Medicare over the finish line, the Johnson administration eventually acquiesced to the Older Americans Act, and Johnson

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
signed it into law in July 1965.133 Despite the broad promises made by the legislation’s objectives, the amount of funding allocated to the new law made accomplishing those objectives a tall order. Given the fact that there were 18,000,000 people who were aged 65 years and over in the United States in 1965, that meant that the federal government was theoretically proposing to spend $0.72 (approximately $5.50 in 2016 dollars) per person over the age of 65 to help achieve the goals of the Older Americans Act.

Even in victory, though, the Older Americans Act was thin gruel compared to what its congressional backers had hoped for before its passage.134 For example, instead of creating a cabinet-level agency dedicated to promoting the welfare of older Americans, the Older Americans Act instead provided for a new, sub-Cabinet Administration on Aging, and charged it with the mundane task of making grants to various state programs designed to assist older Americans.135 The

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133 See Blue Carstenson’s Memorandum Weekly Report, National Council of Senior Citizens, Inc., 26 September 1963, pg. 3, in which he boasted that “Secretary Celebrezze testified against the Fogarty-McNamara bill to establish an Administration on Aging. This action reinforces a wide-spread feeling that he is not really interested in hospital insurance, aging, or senior citizens. This position was unwise and very unpopular. His program on aging continues to be a political liability.” Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Subjects. National Council of Senior Citizens, Inc., 26 September 1963, JFKL. Representative John Fogarty (D-RI) and Senator Patrick McNamara (D-MI) had originally proposed their joint legislation under the title “The Older Americans Act of 1963” on August 6, 1963, but it would not be signed into law until two years later. See “Senior Citizen News,” August-September 1963, pg. 3, in National Council of Senior Citizens, Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Subjects. National Council of Senior Citizens, Inc., 1963: 29 August-19 September, JFKL.

134 See, for example, the Senate Special Committee of Aging, Statement of William C. Fitch, Executive Director, American Association of Retired Persons and National Retired Teachers Association, Services for Senior Citizens: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Federal, State, and Community Services of the Special Committee on Aging, United States Senate, 88th Congress, 2nd Session, Part 1 – Washington, D.C., January 16, 1964, in which Fitch, a former HEW departmental official, expressed his belief that “the Older Americans Act…offers great promise of assistance in the development of new or improved programs to help older persons through grants for community planning and services for training, through research or training project grants.” Pointedly referencing Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 State of the Union Address, in which the President announced the commencement of his administration’s War on Poverty, Fitch told the assembled Senators in his testimony that “it is urgent that, as we are asked to ‘pursue poverty wherever it exists,’ we must distinguish between the elderly who are independent and self-sufficient and those who are in need of public welfare…I[t]he Older Americans Act makes possible a balanced program in aging to enable our older people to secure equal opportunity, to the full and free enjoyment of income, health, housing, employment, and the pursuit of meaningful activity.” (Ibid., 41).

Administration on Aging was provided with an appropriation of roughly $8 million (1967 dollars) and had just eight-seven employees; by contrast, the Welfare Administration, which administered Aid to the Blind, Old Age Assistance, Medicaid, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children programs was granted an appropriation approaching $4.5 billion (1967 dollars) and had over 1,300 employees.136

In other words, the Older Americans Act was a drop in the bucket, especially when compared to federal expenditures on long-standing programs like Social Security’s old-age assistance program. Even though the new Administration on Aging was off to a slow start, the law had some underlying potential. The Older Americans Act’s architects had intended the new law to fund “community planning and coordination of programs” and to support “demonstrations of programs or activities which are particularly valuable in carrying out such purposes [of the Act].”137 These activities included, among other things, assisting older people to “secure equal opportunity to the full and free enjoyment of…an adequate income in retirement,” “the best physical and mental health…without regard to economic status,” affordable housing, and finally increased employment opportunities. This broad set of goals that would likely take far more funding and personnel than Congress had thus far been willing to grant to the Administration on Aging.138

In essence, though, the Older Americans Act committed the federal government to improve the lives of elderly people by amplifying the ongoing efforts of state and local governments to do so. While the law appeared to herald a new era in the federal government’s efforts to combat the myriad number of social and economic problems facing older people, it was also clear to federal policymakers that the success of such efforts relied heavily upon the existing infrastructure built by

136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
state and local officials. The Johnson administration admitted as much. As HEW Secretary John Gardner affirmed in a May 1966 to state officials, “you know better than anyone else that the enactment of Federal programs – for aging, health, education, or any social endeavor – does not mean a lessened responsibility on the part of the States or local communities or the many nongovernment institutions and agencies.”

Gardner further observed that

> [w]e provide the resources. It’s your responsibility to use them. The Federal Government can’t bring about the final result in Washington…Our programs won’t work unless there is real vitality at the State and local end of the partnership – and that’s where you come in.

While Gardner conceded that although there had been a significant legislative expansion of federal responsibility on behalf of older Americans, the success of those programs still fundamentally rested upon the willingness of state and local officials to participate.

In New York and California, state officials welcomed the added assistance from the federal government in dealing with their growing welfare rolls by shifting older recipients away from receipt of public assistance funds and towards rehabilitation for work or compensated community service projects where possible. Their rationale for doing so was straightforward. As an inducement to state and local officials, the Older Americans Act provided federal officials with a powerful tool: namely, millions of dollars’ worth of federal money ready to be disbursed starting immediately in 1965, with more funds to be made available by future appropriations every year for

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140 Ibid.

the next seven years.142 Ultimately, the law aimed to foster and support the creation of state and local community-level plans and programs for the aging rather than to create a new, centralized federal agency that catered solely to the needs of the aged. Congress had initially considered that latter option, sought by Senator McNamara and Congressman Fogarty, but ultimately rejected it because of underlying concerns that such an agency could overreach into affairs that were the domain of individual states and local communities.

The largely decentralized framework erected by the Older Americans Act, though, quietly redounded in its favor. Essentially, by keeping the emphasis on state and local level plans, the law successfully supplemented existing state and local activities, programs, and initiatives and provided new federal seed monies for previously unfunded demonstrations and experimental projects that could conceivably improve the lives of older people. This formulation enjoyed support not only from organized labor, senior citizen advocacy groups, but also from a nationwide coalition of private welfare and state and local officials throughout the country. Indeed, the funding provided by the Older Americans Act eventually spurred the creation of new state-level plans in every American state and territory (save for American Samoa) over the course of the next five years, with most plans brought into being within the first year of the Act’s existence.143 In addition, the state plans created by the law offered the means to cement the nascent alliance between welfare officials at all levels of


government with the growing number of private organizations like the National Council of Senior Citizens that promoted the expansion of government assistance to older Americans.144

The skillful ability of the 1964 Johnson campaign to turn the issue of protecting Social Security into an effective cudgel against Barry Goldwater did not go unnoticed by other politicians in Washington, many whom suddenly became more attentive to the plight of older Americans. In June 1965, the Senate Special Committee on Aging held hearings investigating the War on Poverty’s relationship to alleviating elderly poverty, and several members of the committee alleged that the Office of Economic Opportunity had neglected older Americans in favor of other impoverished groups.145 From the very beginning of the hearings, the assembled senators made clear their belief that “OEO programs can do far more than presently in behalf of the Nation’s elderly poor.”146 A long list of representatives from the growing number of old-age groups (including the NCSC and the AARP) largely concurred with that assessment. John W. Edelman, a longtime labor union organizer and now NCSC president, observed that

most of the OEO programs lean heavily toward the concept of education and training as instruments of breaking the cycle of poverty – hence the emphasis on youth. For most persons aged 65 and over, preparation for jobs other than short-term, on-the-job training would be unrealistic…the National Council of Senior Citizens wishes

144 The Older Americans Act made provisions for the HEW Secretary to approve submitted individual State plans – to be “administered or supervised by a single State agency” and to “make grants to or contracts with State agencies” to heavily subsidize “model projects for carrying out the purposes of this title” which “provide services for, or create opportunities for, older persons.” See U.S. Administration on Aging, Older Americans Act of 1965, As Amended: Text And History,” pg. 11, Social and Rehabilitative Service, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, November 1970.


America to undertake vital new programs to fight poverty among the Nation’s youth – but we must fight more aggressively to defeat poverty among the aged. We cannot fight half the battle. If we do – we may lose the whole war.147

Other leaders in the field of old-age advocacy echoed his criticism. Geneva Mathiasen, the Executive Director of the National Council on Aging (NCOA), stated her organization had received “correspondence and personal inquiries…from those people who are concerned with the problems of older people at the local level…because of the lack of interest shown by the local office of economic opportunity organization [OEO] in the needs of the elderly poor.”148

After several more witnesses echoed the points made by Edelman and Mathiasen, Sargent Shriver, the Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, testified before the committee, admitting “none of us at the headquarters of the war against poverty is satisfied with what we are now doing for the benefit of the aged.” He blamed the agency’s shortcomings on a variety of factors, including the lack of “concrete, specific programs or suggestions about how we can carry the war on poverty effectively to the aged.”149 Defending his agency’s work up to that point, Shriver pleaded “we have believed that in setting up a war against poverty Congress wanted us to work on the most disadvantaged, the poorest people, in our Nation, not to take the easy ones, you might say, the relatively easy ones, but to work on the worst.”150 When pressed by senators as to why OEO had not worked to develop partnerships with state and local agencies that assisted the elderly poor, Shriver could offer no compelling answer. Instead, he blamed Congress for failing to insert a mandate in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 requiring the allocation of funds to programs

147 Ibid., 7-8.
148 Ibid., 28.
149 Ibid., 53-55.
150 Ibid., 55.
dealing with the elderly poor, an argument that, while true, did little to alleviate Congress’s concerns about the OEO.\textsuperscript{151}

In truth, while the Office of Economic Opportunity had already funded some programs for the elderly such as the Foster Grandparents Program, which offered older people the opportunity to serve as mentors for poor children in select cities like New York and Chicago, its efforts were designed primarily to help impoverished urban communities escape the “cycle of poverty” by offering vocational education and training to unemployed, working age youths.\textsuperscript{152} This programmatic emphasis was obvious to observant state and local welfare officials. As Garson Meyer, the chairman of New York’s advisory committee for its state-level Office for the Aging wrote in response to congressional inquiries about the relationship between the OEO’s antipoverty efforts and New York’s initiatives: “although many communities [in New York State] are engaged in other phases of the antipoverty program, or are providing programs and services for the elderly through the State and community-aided programs, there is, almost without exception, no involvement of the older population in these antipoverty programs.”\textsuperscript{153}

The senators gathered at the 1965 OEO hearings were not terribly pleased with Shriver’s answers. During the subsequent testimonies of other witnesses who followed Shriver, they repeatedly highlighted the Older Americans Act as a necessary corrective to OEO’s emphasis on youth unemployment and poverty.\textsuperscript{154} In a final report published a year after the hearings, the Special Committee on Aging lambasted the Office of Economic Opportunity for its paltry efforts, and

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 65.
approvingly quoted Geneva Mathiasen’s testimony on the need for the war on poverty’s programs to relieve the poverty of both the young and the old:

[W]e are well aware of the needs of children and youth. But we believe a government must show concern for the needs of all its people, and that older people who are spending the closing years of their lives in poverty deserve their fair share of the funds allotted to the elimination of poverty deserve their fare of the funds allotted to the elimination of poverty in our country.\textsuperscript{155}

Rebuking Shriver, the committee emphasized in its findings that “the war on poverty can only be successful to the extent that it succeeds in lifting the elderly out of poverty” and that “when it passed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964…Congress intended that the programs authorized benefit the elderly as well as other age groups.”\textsuperscript{156} The committee urged that a “high-level position or positions” be established with the Office of Economic Opportunity in order to “assure adequate consideration of the needs of the elderly in conducting the war on poverty” and that OEO “develop to their full potential the elderly-oriented programs which it has already begun.”\textsuperscript{157} However, there were only four OEO’s elderly-oriented programs: the Foster Grandparents, Medicare Alert, Project Green Thumb, and Home Health Aides. The committee further urged that OEO fund more community action programs oriented around the needs of the elderly, including employment programs, nutrition programs, housing programs, and senior centers.\textsuperscript{158}

Despite the Special Committee on Aging’s disapproval, though, OEO’s activities to combat elderly poverty remained limited throughout 1965 and 1966.\textsuperscript{159} As an internal OEO task force report

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 5-7.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 17-19.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 22-29.
\textsuperscript{159} Besides the OEO, the Johnson administration had examined other options to expand the War on Poverty to more fully encompass older Americans. In September 1965, the administration’s Task Force on Income Maintenance had considered the option of endorsing a new, targeted income supplement program for older Americans (defined as people
concluded in August 1965, the agency had hitherto devoted insufficient staff and resources to combatting elderly poverty.\(^{160}\) The OEO task force ultimately argued that, despite the important limitations of funding, staff resources, and competing federal authorities, “much can be done for the older poor” under the existing Economic Opportunity Act legislation.\(^{161}\) The task force recommended that “consideration be given to establishing a program for a neighborhood senior corps paralleling the neighborhood youth corps” which would “provide part-time work opportunities” and “would not be competitive with youth for available jobs.”\(^{162}\) In particular, the task force report argued that “the passage of Medicare will result in greater utilization of a variety of health services and add to existing shortages of personnel,” and that this shortage represented a tremendous opportunity for the OEO to fill with a “senior health corps.”\(^{163}\)

Essentially, the proposed senior health corps would solve two problems at once: it would alleviate elderly poverty through public employment while filling a critical manpower need which the enactment of the Johnson administration’s health program had greatly augmented. As the task force report noted, “this [program] offers unusual opportunities for the middle-aged and older poor and others…many could qualify with short-term on-the-job training…educational prerequisites will not be an obstacle in most situations” with the additional bonuses that “discrimination based on race aged 65 or over), noting that “it may be politically easier to devise a new program to eliminate poverty in this group than for others, despite the existence of OASDI and old-age assistance,” but cautioned that “it is administratively difficult to designed alternative programs for aiding the aged poor without substantial spillover to the 5.2 million aged families and 1.9 million unrelated aged individuals whose incomes are above the poverty level.” Ultimately, the Task Force concluded that adopting a new minimum income program for older Americans “might endanger progress in improving the Social Security program,” and the suggestion for a targeted income maintenance program for older Americans was dropped until it was later revived by the Nixon administration seven years later. See Report of the Task Force on Income Maintenance, September 18, 1965, pg. 11, in Box 19, Office Files of Joseph Califano, LBJL.


\(^{161}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{162}\) Ibid.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 16.
has been substantially overcome in these services [and] opportunities for employment will be available everywhere – rural and urban.”

**Jobs for the Elderly?**

As presented by the OEO task force, the proposed senior health corps was a solution that sounded almost too good to be true. The refusal on the part of some southern hospitals and primary care providers to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in order to be eligible for financial reimbursement from Medicare for services rendered meant that there was a distinct possibility that elderly African-Americans would be unable to receive better medical care or hospitalization in formerly all-white southern hospitals, thus subverting the ability of the Civil Rights Act to desegregate American medicine. In addition, in order to circumvent complaints about federal interference in local affairs, the OEO task force proposed that the senior health corps be “sponsored or operated by a Community Action Agency, a Visiting Nurse Association, a Public Health or Welfare Agency, a Hospital” – i.e., not directly by the federal government, though it highlighted that “close collaboration with [the] Social Security Administration, Public Health Service…would be necessary in planning and implementing this project.”

But the proposed senior health corps never made it past the initial proposal stage. It was not until 1966 that Johnson administration officials, concerned about the growing blowback to the War on Poverty, decided to formulate a strategy to develop policies aimed at alleviating elderly poverty. These new efforts also proved necessary because the OEO, despite Sargent Shriver’s pledges to Congress in 1965 and again in 1966, remained more firmly committed to youth programs than those that favored the elderly. As disorganized as its beginnings had been, the OEO’s guiding

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164 Ibid., 17.
165 Ibid., 18.
philosophy had eventually coalesced around the belief that expending limited federal funds on youth programs was a more effective way to break “the cycle of poverty” rather than programs for the elderly, who presumably would remain largely mired in poverty due to limited employment opportunities, public assistance, and personal resources.

These suspicions were confirmed when Shriver, testifying once more before a Senate panel in late January 1966, “conceded that there was very little his poverty agency could do to help the elderly poor” and instead “recommended expanded Medicare and larger direct cash payments under Social Security to ‘reach the majority of older people who need more money and need it now’ to live ‘in decency and dignity’.”¹⁶⁷ For his part, Shriver blamed external factors for the OEO’s failure to combat elderly poverty, his agency did not deserve Congressional censure for its limited efforts to deal with elderly poverty because that responsibility lay elsewhere. He observed “older people have special maintenance and assistance needs. Many older people are very poor. But, in our concern for all poor people, we must recognize the existence of competing needs relative to a limited supply of poverty dollars…Congress charged the Administration on Aging of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare with the general responsibility for older Americans…I am confident the Congress will assure that this agency’s authorization and appropriation will be adequate.” See “Poverty and the Older American,” Statement by R. Sargent Shriver, Director, Office of Economic Opportunity, Before the Senate Subcommittee on Aging of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, June 2, 1966, in Box 181, Office Files of Frederick Panzer, LBJL.

shortcomings in dealing with the elderly poor, and singled out the lack of interest on the part of local communities in “problems and programs involving the elderly poor” as well as the fact that two-thirds of elderly poor people over the age of 65 were “women, almost half of whom had never worked before” and who possessed low educational levels that prevented them from effectively competing for employment opportunities. In other words, the OEO’s lack of engagement with the problem of elderly poverty was not caused by internal factors at the OEO; nor would the OEO be willing to expend much of its limited resources to tackle the issue.168

While Shriver was right to point out that employment opportunities for older women were starkly limited, his arguments to explain the OEO’s lack of success in combatting elderly poverty were a bit too self-exculpatory. They overlooked the fact that there were local communities that were interested in dealing with the problems of the elderly poor; New York City, southern California, and Florida offered plenty of examples to counter Shriver’s statements. Shriver also did not take into account the possibility of working in conjunction with the newly-created Administration on Aging, which had been authorized by Congress to award $17.5 million in appropriations to “states and public and private nonprofit organizations to develop programs for the aged and to train personnel to teach the aged new skills,” a broad mandate which had the potential to mesh well with OEO’s commitment to local community participation in its programs.169

Still, Shriver had a point that expanding Medicare and raising the amount of direct cash payments under Social Security had the potential to be more effective in combatting elderly poverty than any individual program sponsored by the OEO, given the OEO’s limited resources and personnel. As Wilbur Cohen, the Under Secretary of HEW, observed in an August 1965 interview with the New York Times, U.S. poverty rolls “could be reduced by 25 to 33 percent through Social

168 Ibid.
Security by raising benefits for the aged and disabled,” though Cohen believed that even with sustained economic growth to fund such increases, elderly poverty would not be fully eradicated.\textsuperscript{170} Rather, Cohen argued that any such increases in Medicare and Social Security would require supplementation by “broad programs of education, the elimination of discrimination in employment, rehabilitation of the disabled, counseling, and other measures.”\textsuperscript{171}

Instead of trying to prod the OEO or Shriver, other Johnson administration officials during the course of 1966 increasingly realized, in the words of one confidential memo, that “there is a need for a program designed specifically to employ the skills of the Nation’s elderly…a program which does not tap these skills on the basis of need or income level alone.”\textsuperscript{172} Additionally, administration officials were also moving to bolster other existing federal efforts to alleviate elderly poverty, a subject that took on increasing urgency as the Older Americans Act and Medicare were being implemented throughout the nation in 1965 and 1966. By May 1966, nearly a year after the enactment of the Older Americans Act, thirty-one states launched new programs with the support of grants of the Administration on Aging. In some instances, these programs strengthened existing programs. In New York, for example, funds disbursed by the Older Americans Act would eventually enable New York City to increase funding for roughly three hundred separate programs for aging city residents. Smooth administration of these programs, in turn, fell upon almost two hundred “private and voluntary health, welfare, and leisure-time agencies.”\textsuperscript{173} In New Jersey, state officials took advantage of the newly available federal funds to add badly needed personnel to its Division of Aging, in preparation for the development of a new state-wide plan for older citizens.\textsuperscript{174}

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
As the state’s governor described it, the New Jersey plan aimed to “encourage…the establishment of local community councils to aid the elderly in a broad spectrum of new programs… [including] how to obtain the fullest benefits for older citizens under the new Federal Housing Act.”

The Johnson administration also launched the first-ever presidential task force dedicated to exploring the lightly regulated private nursing home industry. The administration’s renewed emphasis on elderly antipoverty programs reflected a growing unease among senior officials that public opinion was curdling against the Great Society, and that some visible demonstration of the Great Society’s commitment to alleviating poverty along a color-blind basis was necessary. As Henry Owen, a senior State Department official wrote to Bill Moyers in May 1966:

I was struck, in the Lou Harris poll, by the fact that the sharpest drop in administration popularity was in the suburbs…I suppose most of this is Vietnam and fear of inflation, but maybe there is also the concern expressed by Senator Barkley’s constituent: “What have you done for me lately?” Perhaps people in the suburbs feel that the main thrust of administration policy (the war on poverty, civil rights, etc.) is now addressed to the urban poor, and that they are on the outside looking in.

As Owen wondered, “could new initiatives dramatize the administration’s concern with issues that worry people in the suburbs?” Owens suggested that the administration focus on health-related issues, given that “most families have seen members struck down by heart disease or cancer; people in the suburbs, being less oppressed by poverty, probably have more time to worry about this than most…any administration which could hold out the prospect of action to reduce this toll would be viewed with favor.” If the administration emphasized health-related programs, Owens believed

175 “Memorandum,” October 28, 1966, in White House Central Files, Subject File, EX FG 600 / Task Force / Natural Beauty, Box 366 in LBJL.
176 Henry Owen to Bill Moyers, May 25, 1966 in Box 16, White House Central Files, Subject Files, EX Health 4-11/22/63. Underlining in original.
177 Ibid. Underlining in original.
that it “would help to dramatize the fact that the administration’s Great Society programs are designed to help all the people, not just the under-privileged.”178

Demonstrating that the Great Society’s programs were helping a wide rather than narrow cross-section of Americans constituency seemed to be a tricky proposition, given the increasingly dramatized efforts of the OEO’s community action programs in organizing impoverished African-American communities in many of the nation’s cities, but the administration’s allies were happy to suggest ways to do so. In June 1966, the National Council of Senior Citizens’ (NCSC) leadership wrote to Robert Hardesty, a White House speechwriter, to report on the mail it had been receiving from older Americans.179 In particular, the NCSC reported that its incoming mail had revealed three major categories of problems: income maintenance, inability to participate in society, and health. To combat these problems, the NCSC recommended that the Johnson administration undertake three steps posthaste. In particular, the NCSC argued that it should first “continue to strengthen the Social Security system” and raise its benefits to a level that would “end poverty among the elderly;” second, that it fund more preventive care for older people as a way to relieve hospital space limitations; and finally, that it should “utilize a series of on-going programs (and initiate new ones as soon as possible)” which will use the wasted skills of older Americans.”180

The NCSC’s recommendations overlapped with internal data collected by the administration about the OEO’s programs for the elderly poor. As limited as OEO’s efforts to combat elderly poverty had been, administration officials were aware that “the experience in the [OEO’s] Foster Grandparent Program has shown that there have been 8 applicants for every position available.” This level of popular demand suggested that there was a sizable reservoir of potential older workers for part-time employment or service opportunities, should the Federal Government be able to devise

178 Ibid.
179 Lawrence O. Houston to Robert Hardesty, June 1, 1966, in Box 13, Personal Papers of Robert Hardesty, LBJL.
180 Ibid. Underlining in original.
one in conjunction with existing public and private welfare agencies.\textsuperscript{181} Moreover, by expanding employment opportunities for the elderly, the Johnson administration hoped to relieve pressure on the Social Security system and the private sector to provide increased employment opportunities. Despite years of rhetoric from N.A.M. and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce about internal efforts by American industry to retain older workers, Labor Department statistics told a different story. As one Johnson administration Task Force report noted, “there has been an average of 850,000 people 45 and over unemployed in recent months…older workers are only 5 percent of ‘new hires’ but account for 27 percent of all unemployed.”\textsuperscript{182} Johnson administration officials estimated that expanding the OEO’s programs could potentially provide up to 100,000 older people with part-time employment. While that would not solve the problem of unemployment among older workers, it offered the possibility of “increas[ing] the emphasis given to the needs of the elderly poor under OEO programs…present OEO programs for the elderly poor have provided employment for only a comparatively few thousand persons.”\textsuperscript{183}

Conclusion

The debate over the OEO’s role in alleviating elderly poverty would continue to bedevil the Johnson administration, despite its otherwise highly impressive legislative record on domestic policy issues for older Americans. In a span of a few months during 1965, the administration had successfully broken a legislative logjam that had prevented the enactment of Medicare, and had then successfully implemented Medicare over the course of the following year with the assistance of the Social Security Administration. In doing so, it had partially fulfilled the aspirations of New Deal liberals that extended back for over three decades. Triumph though it was, Medicare was only one


\textsuperscript{182} “Summary of Proposals: Employment Opportunities,” Task Force on Older Americans Report, n.d., [1966?], in Box 362, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
piece of a much larger legislative agenda that social reformers both within and outside of the administration successfully enacted into law. The passage of the Older Americans Act in July 1965 had indicated that congressional advocates wanted the federal government to take a more active role in providing adequate funding to social services provided to older Americans. The Johnson administration, though, was considerably less sanguine about the Administration on Aging created by the Older Americans Act for this purpose, preferring instead to direct such efforts through other existing channels such as the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In light of the administration’s opposition, congressional advocates placed a tighter scrutiny on the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity, which they believed did not place sufficient emphasis on the problem of elderly poverty.

Responding to this scrutiny, the Johnson administration began to ramp up internal efforts in 1966 to nudge the OEO towards addressing elderly poverty, both as a way to bolster the fledgling agency’s popular support and as a way to expand the breadth of federal initiatives to ameliorate poverty among older Americans. Increasingly, the administration was beginning to realize that the problem of elderly poverty was not simply the product of inadequate income and unavailable medical care. Rather, it was linked to inadequate community and social services as well.

This realization led the administration to acquiesce to the Older Americans Act, but not to fully embrace it. Some officials within the administration, most notably, Wilbur Cohen, the HEW Under-Secretary, believed that the administration needed to advocate a more aggressive agenda to tackle a broader range of issues like employment discrimination, prescription drug prices, and the growing private nursing home industry. Already, major states like New York and California had begun to address some of these concerns, especially employment discrimination, but these efforts still varied widely from state to state. The administration would turn more fully to these subjects after Medicare’s successful implementation in mid-1966. Until that time, though, most of the
administration’s energies remained focused on a smooth roll out of Medicare, including its efforts to ensure the full desegregation of southern hospitals and nursing homes.

Starting in late 1966 and extending into 1967, the administration would devote more time and attention to supplementing Social Security and Medicare with additional programs and initiatives for older Americans. This pivot had its origins in the administration’s numerous task forces, which were largely composed of external experts borrowed from academia and government think tanks. Over the course of the preceding three years, these task forces had examined a broad range of issues, including private pension reform, consumer protection, the nursing home industry, income maintenance, and other needs of older Americans, and had produced numerous reports proposing and explaining new initiatives which the administration could undertake.184 Most of these initiatives would fail to progress beyond the proposal stage, but as the administration sought to identify and enact new domestic policy goals after the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid, it leaned upon the accumulated proposals to articulate its vision for a continuing activist government on behalf of older Americans, especially those who remained mired in poverty.

By 1966, the Johnson administration could boast a record of domestic policy achievements that rivaled the New Deal. The enactment of Medicare and Medicaid, in particular, were savored by administration officials eager to bask in the overwhelming acclaim that the new legislation enjoyed, save for the opposition of the American Medical Association and far right-wing groups who believed that the administration had taken the nation one further step down the road to serfdom. The variety of advocacy groups that had successfully organized and mobilized elderly people to push for Medicare also celebrated, with the National Council of Senior Citizens cheering the loudest.

184 For more on the Johnson administration’s use of task forces to drive policy formulation, see Nancy Smith Kegan, “Presidential Task Force Operation during the Johnson Administration.” Presidential Studies Quarterly 15, no. 2 (1985): 320-29.
In particular, Medicare would also help to set the stage for the next phase of the senior state’s development. As part of the process of implementing Medicare, the Social Security Administration had worked in conjunction with the Office of Economic Opportunity to locate nearly 500,000 senior citizens throughout the nation and enroll them in Medicare. This initiative, titled “Medicare Alert” had made obvious that the problems of the elderly were not limited solely to access to medical care or hospitalization; rather, as a report sponsored by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) observed, there was a gaping chasm between the provision of social and community services and the ability of older people to access them.

Figuring out how to fill this chasm would occupy a more significant portion of the Johnson administration’s time between 1966 and 1968 than it had during the previous two years, when the administration focused firmly on securing the enactment of Medicare. Even before the enactment of Medicare, though, voices outside the Johnson administration on Capitol Hill had lobbied hard for a more comprehensive approach to the problems of the elderly that envisioned Medicare as part of a larger, more ambitious agenda. Senator Patrick McNamara (D-MI) and Congressman John Fogarty (D-RI) were the chief proponents of this broader approach, and their ambitions found partial realization in the enactment of the Older Americans Act.

However, the administration kept the Older Americans Act at a distance, and the law’s promise of providing more federal funds, supporting new research into the problems of older Americans, and setting up a new coordinating mechanism for future federal and state collaboration in this policy area remained largely neglected during its early years. Additionally, the administration

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displayed lukewarm enthusiasm for more unconventional proposals to create public employment opportunities for older people. This reluctance stemmed partly from the expenses involved, and partly because of the administration’s fear of the potential objections that private employers and organized labor might raise to such proposals. The administration ultimately chose to sidestep the issue and opted instead to copy the statewide efforts of New York and California to ban age-based discrimination in private employment.\(^{187}\) The course that it chose aimed to avoid unnecessary confrontations with an increasingly skeptical Congress, but at the price of enacting legislation that produced limited results.\(^{188}\)

Instead, the administration preferred to work through existing bureaucratic mechanisms like HEW and to prod the OEO to take a more active role in combatting elderly poverty through sponsorship of community action programs primarily designed to meet the needs of older Americans. In light of OEO’s reluctance to do more, and the competing needs and other needy constituencies that HEW also had to serve, the Johnson administration began to embrace the Older Americans Act after 1966 along with a more aggressive expansion of Social Security as its preferred way of dealing with the issue of elderly poverty.\(^{189}\)

Starting in late 1966, the administration began to prioritize issues related to elderly poverty, and to invite outside opinion from academic experts, professional gerontologists, social workers, as well as state and local welfare officials to help it devise anti-poverty programs specifically designed

\(^{187}\) The calls for a new public employment option were particularly strongest from the political left, with the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) leading the charge. In January 1967, the ADA called for new tax increases to fund a new guaranteed annual income program and the creation of five million new public service jobs. As the New York Times observed, the ADA’s 1967 proposals outdid “its own 20-year record of espousing liberal causes” and “went far beyond anything proposed by the President.” See Marjorie Hunter, “A.D.A. For Tax Rise to Pay for Gains,” The New York Times, January 5, 1967.

\(^{188}\) See Joseph A. Loftus, “Congress Passes Poverty Program with New Curbs,” The New York Times, October 21, 1966. In 1966, Congress had extended the antipoverty program, but with significantly less funding and more supervision than it had in the program’s original authorization legislation, and specifically provided funding for new O.E.O. staff members to tackle the problems of the elderly poor.

for the elderly. These new programs would emphasize access to additional sources of income, health care, improved nutrition, and access to institutions that were capable of preventing them from becoming socially isolated. Work to bolster these efforts would accelerate after 1966, and the senior state’s development would continue to accelerate as the federal government refocused some of its antipoverty efforts in conjunction with its partners at the local and state level and in the private sector.
By 1966, the senior state had begun to enter a new phase in its development. During the previous thirty years, federal efforts to ensure economic security in old-age had gradually evolved from a Social Security-centered model whose cornerstone lay in contributory social insurance on a national scale. This model had only come into partial fruition by the late 1940s. Instead, other actors such as private employers, voluntary social welfare organizations, and state and local governments, had tried to fill the gap left by an incomplete Social Security system. While a proliferating number of employer-sponsored private pension systems offered a stable source of retirement income for some older Americans, a universal solution to the problem of old-age economic security remained stubbornly elusive. As a new public-private hybrid welfare state began to take shape during the postwar years, local and state officials found to their dismay that concentrated levels of poverty among older people continued to persist, and had in fact begun to rise once more to levels not seen since the depths of the Great Depression.

The failure to enact national health insurance in the late 1940s and during the 1950s had further exacerbated this issue. As economist Dora L. Costa has pointed out, between 1960 and 1965, “state and local expenditures on medical assistance for the aged rose by more than 1000 percent.” It was not too surprising, then, that state and local governments eagerly supported Medicare in the years leading up to its enactment in 1965. While medical assistance for the elderly had become an increasingly large portion of many state and local budgets before the enactment of Medicare, after the enactment of Medicare, the costs associated with providing social and community services

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became a more significant budget item on more than one state and city budget. Social welfare advocates thereafter began to press for more federal assistance in this area as a way to alleviate the fiscal strains faced by many communities. In response, the Johnson administration and Congress responded at first by attempting to redirect the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to spend more of its funds and devote more of its time to the problems of the elderly poor.

These attempts produced mixed results. Consequently, the Johnson administration turned to its task forces of outside experts in order to devise new strategy for the administration to follow as it tackled the multitude of interrelated issues associated with elderly poverty. As part of its search for a new path forward, the Johnson administration began to more fully embrace the framework of federal, state, and local cooperation laid out in the Older Americans Act. It did so because the law offered an existing structure for federal, state, and local welfare officials to work together to identify and fund social and community service programs that could improve the lives of older people without doing so in a demeaning fashion to recipients of government assistance or that threatened to usurp local prerogatives. Though the programs sponsored by the law and the OEO were not on the same fiscal scale as either Social Security or Medicare, they demonstrated a new level of commitment on the part of the federal government to try and equalize the level of public assistance provided at the local level to older Americans, and to make it possible for more states and localities to provide services that otherwise might have gone unsupported.

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2 New programs at the state level increasingly sought to provide “aid for the aging in their homes,” with an emphasis on assisting the elderly who still sought to live independently rather than as members of public or private old-age institutions, a marked shift from prior years when qualification for public assistance had been more directly tied to institutionalization. See Peter Kihss, “Aid for the Aging in Their Homes Is Pushed in State Programs: Projects Described,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 1967; “New Apartments for the Elderly Avoid ‘Nursing Home’ Approach,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 1962.

3 Funding from the Older Americans Act made possible the creation in 1968-1969 of a unified New York City office to deal solely with the issues of the elderly, thereby separating senior citizens from other recipients of public assistance. The new office replaced the *ad hoc* arrangements that had previously existed across numerous city departments and agencies and the nearly 200 private and voluntary agencies in New York that operated programs for the city’s elderly residents. See “City to Set Up Office To Help the Elderly,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 1968.
Additionally, the Johnson administration aggressively raised Social Security benefit levels, in part to compensate for Vietnam War-related inflation, and in part as an antipoverty measure that did not require the creation of a new governmental program, a necessity after the 1966 congressional midterm elections decimated the progressive working majority that the Johnson administration had enjoyed on Capitol Hill after the landslide Democratic electoral victory in the 1964 presidential election. The Johnson administration’s emphasis on improving social and community services and its push to raise Social Security benefit levels would be extended by the Nixon administration, which would work with a Democratic Congress after 1969 to build on the newly expanded foundation for federal, state, and local cooperation on social welfare services for older Americans that had been bequeathed to it. The Nixon administration’s ideological emphasis on “New Federalism” (effectively a devolution of power from the central government back to the states) meant that it experienced little difficulty in embracing the Johnson administration’s adapted approach to dealing with the issue of elderly poverty or the continuing effort to shore up existing federal and state mechanisms for providing economic and health security in old age. This bipartisan commitment helped to further solidify the senior state as an essential function of government, albeit in a haphazard fashion.

Perhaps the greatest boost to the senior state after the enactment of Medicare came out of the failure of the Nixon administration to secure enactment of its Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which it had first proposed in August 1969 as a form of universal guaranteed annual income designed to replace the patchwork of categorical assistance programs that had evolved since the New Deal era. FAP had some antecedents in the Johnson administration, which had likewise weighed the virtues of simplifying the nation’s increasingly complex, chaotic, and duplicative social welfare system but had opted against doing so. But the Nixon administration soon found that FAP engendered fierce opposition from both the political left and right, whose opposition ultimately doomed it to failure.
Instead, the Nixon administration was able to salvage the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program from the wreckage of FAP. Like FAP, the SSI program proposed a new level of guaranteed annual income, albeit limited solely to selected categories of recipients, the most prominent of whom were elderly people. Unlike FAP, though, the SSI program secured easy passage in Congress. Taken together with other major improvements to the existing Social Security system that significantly raised benefits, the triumph of the SSI program signaled an unlikely culmination of efforts by liberal reformers and old-age advocacy groups during the course of the previous decade to broaden and deepen the level of federal commitment to the welfare of the nation’s elderly population.  

Moreover, despite the Nixon administration’s demonstrated hostility towards the OEO and traditional welfare programs, it acquiesced to three significant amendments to the Older Americans Act between 1969 and 1974, which broadened the original legislation enacted in 1965 and steered significant new sums of federal funds into the programs supported by the now amended law. The successful enactment of these amendments put into place the last major piece of the postwar senior state, with the federal government and the states acting in concert to financially support and sustain

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4 In 1972, Congress authorized (and Richard Nixon acceded to) legislation that raised Social Security benefits by 20 percent and “adopted automatic cost-of-living adjustments for Social Security benefits,” thus restoring the purchasing power of Social Security benefits that had been eroded by the federal government’s inflationary rates of spending during the prior decade. See Costa, Evolution of Retirement, 178.

5 Specifically, in 1969, a series of amendments to the Older Americans Act “provided grants for model demonstration projects and the Foster Grandparents and Retired Senior Volunteer Programs.” In 1972, “new Title VII [was] created under the Older Americans Act authorizing funds for a national nutrition program for the elderly”; in 1973, the “Older Americans Act Comprehensive Services Amendments established Area Agencies on Aging. The amendments added a new Title V, which authorized grants to local community agencies for multi-purpose senior centers, and created the Community Service Employment grant program for low-income persons age 55 and older, administered by the Department of Labor.” Finally, in 1974, Congress enacted “Title XX of the Social Security Amendments authorized grants to states for social services. These programs included protective services, homemaker services, transportation services, adult day care services, training for employment, information and referral, nutrition assistance, and health support. Older Americans Act amendments added transportation under Title III model projects.” See U.S. Administration on Aging website, “Historical Evolution of Programs for Older Americans,” U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Source URL: https://aoa.acl.gov/aoa_programs/oaar/resources/History.aspx (accessed April 1, 2017). By 1972, the Older Americans Act had already been appropriated $157 million; the Nixon administration proposed raising this sum by another $100 million as part of a “comprehensive strategy for helping older Americans.” See also Robert B. Semple, Jr., “Nixon Asks a Rise in Aid to Elderly,” The New York Times, March 24, 1972.
community and social service programs and initiatives that were frequently anti-poverty programs with a respectable veneer on them, so as to avoid incurring the wrath of old-age advocacy groups (and senior citizens themselves) that did not want to be stigmatized as welfare recipients. As Lyndon Johnson remarked in a February 1968 ceremony inaugurating a new program of community service programs for older Americans:

In March, more than 17 million older citizens will receive a Social Security increase of some 13 percent. When the benefit checks go out, another 1 million Americans will be lifted above the poverty line—a goal that we are working toward. Medicare—that for many, many years was not seriously considered and after it was considered and passed, many said would not work at all—is now flourishing...But beyond all of this, we all have another goal. That goal is to guarantee to every older American not only security, but the pride of being able to be active and being able to be productive.

The three core components of the senior state—economic security, health security, and, finally, social and community service provisions—had come together by 1975 into a formidable juggernaut, one which, aside from defense spending, accounted for an increasingly prominent part of the federal government’s overall expenditures, and one that dwarfed other, much more high profile and increasingly controversial social assistance programs such as the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children).

In sum, while the overall War on Poverty declared in 1964 by Lyndon Johnson and headed by Sargent Shriver and the OEO may have produced mixed results, the more subdued war on elderly poverty waged by lower level officials within the Johnson and Nixon administrations, as well as by select members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, proved to be far more successful at institutionalizing mechanisms for the alleviation of poverty for many of the nation’s

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elderly. Nevertheless, this result did not appear likely in 1965-6, when the Johnson administration’s actions seemed to be lagging at best, and the overall direction of the War on Poverty seemed to have more critics than supporters.\(^8\)

**The Johnson Administration, Older Americans, and the War on Poverty**

At a meeting in early September 1966 to discuss the administration’s agenda for older Americans, a host of senior administration officials, including Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz, HEW Secretary John Gardner, OEO head Sargent Shriver, as well as senior Johnson aides Douglass Cater and Joseph Califano, examined the options before them.\(^9\) After concluding that federal health programs for the aged like Medicare were adequate, the assembled officials then proceeded to look at the Older Americans Act to see how it could be better utilized. A quick review of the legislation revealed that while it “provide[d] a statutory base for the development and initiation of programs aimed at offering an opportunity for a more meaningful life to the elderly,” no “clearly defined programs” had been developed.\(^10\)

Instead, “insufficient appropriations, lack of imagination, and internal differences” had led to federal inaction. The assembled group agreed that “consideration should be given” to new approaches to “improve the life of the elderly,” that included removal of “restrictions on continued employment of the aged,” reducing the “negative impact of social security and private retirement plans on the disposition to work,” and utilizing the elderly “in community service projects” such as the Foster Grandparents program, beautification, and “services for the elderly by the elderly.”\(^11\)

Moving quickly to begin the process of translating these proposals into policy, Califano sent a confidential memo in late September 1966 to HEW Secretary John Gardner, the recently appointed...
chairman of the administration’s Task Force on Older Americans, to urge him to pursue an ambitious, four part agenda that included “ways to expand employment opportunities for the aged...ways to improve the life of the elderly...ways to improve housing for the elderly...[and to] examine present division of responsibilities among Federal agencies for programs for the aged,” and to return his findings within a month’s time.  

The sudden seriousness of the administration in its approach to elderly poverty could be seen in the lineup of the Task Force’s members. Unlike some other administration task forces, the Task Force on Older Americans featured a broad representation of federal departments; Califano explicitly requested that Gardner choose “the finest possible talent on this Task Force,” given the administration’s “deep concern for the problems facing older persons in our society.” Working quickly to respond to Califano’s command, Gardner and the rest of his task force pored over existing administration achievements and actions as well as unrealized ideas, plans, and proposals which had languished for some time. In its subsequent recommendations to Califano, the task force urged as one of its top priorities that the administration consider “[f]ederal aid...to communities for the employment of older people in public service activities on a part-time basis with public and private nonprofit organizations.” That proposal immediately led to an interagency turf war between HEW and the Department of Labor, both of which wanted administrative control over the proposed program. Refereeing in the conflict between HEW and Labor, Phillip S. Hughes, the Acting Director of the Bureau of the Budget, argued that the program be placed within HEW, but

12 Joseph Califano to John W. Gardner, September 21, 1966, in Box 90, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
13 Ibid. The members included Wilbur Cohen from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, W. Willard Wirtz from the Department of Labor, and other mid to senior level officials within the administration.
14 Phillip S. Hughes to Joseph Califano, November 26, 1966, in Box 90, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
that it be limited to a “demonstration project” rather than made into a full-scale “new categorical program of HEW.”

The task force’s other proposals similarly ran into bureaucratic domain conflicts elsewhere. As a contemporaneous internal administration report noted, the Task Force’s proposals would

> provide for administrative and/or legislative modification of existing people-oriented programs in order to achieve a better accommodation of services and facilities to the needs of the elderly. However, the unavoidable proliferation of responsibility for such programs among several Federal agencies requires extraordinary measures to assure adequate coordination and the adaptation of all programs to the changing needs of all population groups.

In late November 1966, a few weeks after a midterm election that had been disastrous for the administration and its liberal congressional allies, officials within the Johnson administration began to pivot on the federal government’s approach to old-age policy and to try and carry out the task force’s recommendations. Prior to this moment, the administration’s efforts to enhance federal programs and initiatives on behalf of impoverished older Americans had largely been centered on Medicare (i.e., its enactment and subsequent efforts to ensure adequate access to health care for senior citizens). As the testimony of multiple private welfare agency leaders and experts during congressional hearings in 1965 had made clear, though, the Office of Economic Opportunity had not placed much emphasis on efforts to combat elderly poverty, an outcome which reflected the strategic decision made by OEO head Sargent Shriver and his staff that youth unemployment – especially in America’s cities – was a far more pressing issue and better use of the federal government’s funds.

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15 Ibid.
16 “Report on Task Force on Older Americans,” November 7, 1966, in Box 90, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
Even before the electoral shellacking which the Democratic Party suffered in 1966, President Johnson had made clear his intent to seek significant increases in Social Security. In the aftermath of political backlash, this objective took on higher priority as the administration began to refocus on less controversial policy items that could attract bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. Writing to senior aide Joseph Califano in late November 1966, HEW official Wilbur Cohen sent a memo detailing a proposed “Older Americans Opportunity Program of 1967,” that compiled many of the recommendations made by the Task Force on Older Americans chaired by HEW Secretary John Gardner a few months beforehand.

The recommendations, broadly speaking, called upon the federal government to eliminate age discrimination in employment, expand employment and community service opportunities for older people, and to augment the Older Americans Act with additional funding sufficiently adequate to fund the Act’s already authorized community service, training, and planning grant programs. In addition to the already extant high priorities of securing an “adequate income and medical care” for older Americans, the task force explicitly recommended that there be “a broad objective of national policy for older Americans,” which would ensure that every older person have “available means which provide opportunities for useful work in the economy…access to community services and facilities…[and] a broader choice of housing and living arrangements.” Ultimately, the task force argued that there was “a critical need for public policy to create more positive economic and social roles for older people in our Nation.”

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
In order to make this new public policy real, the task force urged the Johnson administration to undertake nine major expansions of existing federal programs or legislation, including the Economic Opportunity Act ("to increase the numbers of middle aged and elderly poor who are either served by or employed in the varied programs under the Act"), the Manpower, Development and Training Act, and the Older Americans Act. The total projected cost of these recommendations stood at $97 million, and notably did not include any recommendations to increase Social Security benefits or to build more features into the recently implemented Medicare program. Rather, the recommendations collected the disparate elements from existing administration initiatives and attempted to repackage them as a more coherent program, which it labeled as "The Older Americans Opportunity Program of 1967."

The Older Americans Opportunity Program represented an attempt to expand the normal ambit of the federal government’s activities on behalf of older Americans. As an earlier internal administration report on the Task Force on Older Americans had noted, there was a "need for public policy that will create opportunity to the elderly for more positive economic and social roles…generally, these proposals provide for administrative and/or legislative modification of existing people-oriented programs in order to achieve a better accommodation of services and facilities to the needs of the elderly." However, the report cautioned that "the unavoidable proliferation of responsibility for such problems among several Federal agencies requires extraordinary measures to assure adequate coordination and the adaptation of all programs to the changing needs of all population groups" and therefore recommended a "revitalization of the

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23 Ibid., 2.
24 "Report on Task Force on Older Americans," Health and Welfare Division (G. Barlous), November 7, 1966, in Box 61, Office Files of Joseph Califano, LBJL.
President’s Council on Aging and a strong staff input by HEW’s Administration on Aging...[to] serve this purpose for the aged clientele.”25

Besides pointing out the need for “adequate coordination” and a more dedicated agency or group within the Executive Branch to advocate for programs for older Americans, the report also highlighted other problems with the task force’s recommendations, starting with the “general absence of a precise, age-related definition of the target group – Older Americans...this absence is most crucial within the context of ‘employment opportunities.’”26 Proposed federal efforts to combat age discrimination received particular censure: “the alleged costs stemming from institutional requirements... [and] employer reluctance to comply could render the enforcement aspects of this proposal infeasible.”27 Other efforts like the proposed older workers employment referral services were derided as “unnecessary” or “inadvisable.”28 Not all of the proposed measures received such condemnation, though. The proposed expansion of rent supplement programs and nutritional services for older people were rated as “essential,” a recommendation which would help lay the groundwork for their survival and incorporation into the federal government’s apparatus.

Despite the mounting criticism on both the political left and right of the administration for its handling of the Vietnam War and of domestic unrest in many of America’s cities, President Johnson’s aides pressed forward with the administration’s agenda for older Americans. The mid-term congressional elections of 1966 had robbed the President of the progressive working majority which he had been able to use to get Medicare, the Voting Rights Act, and other long-delayed legislation through the usual congressional gauntlet of committee hearings, votes, and backroom wheeling and dealing. Starting in January 1967, a newly re-energized and considerably less

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 2.
28 Ibid., 3-4.
progressive congressional majority would take their seats in the House and Senate chambers and wield the gavels once more, and not a few of those gavels were bound to be aimed like battering rams at the Great Society.

Against these worsened odds for legislative success, though, the Johnson administration advanced an aggressive policy agenda on behalf of the elderly. In late January 1967, Johnson sent a comprehensive message to Congress outlining an ambitious agenda of new initiatives for the federal government to undertake in the coming Congressional session.\(^29\) Unlike President Kennedy’s similarly lengthy message in 1963 which had emphasized the need to enact Medicare, Johnson’s 1967 message focused primarily on the need to secure an adequate level of income support for older Americans.\(^30\) Johnson’s message met with wide support in the press, with even *Life* magazine going out of its way to praise the President, noting that “Lyndon Johnson is at his best when he is talking about ways to help people out of misery…his message on older Americans sent to the Congress last week was moving, and in a year when he will have to curtail many dreams…there was a convincing simplicity in the language of his statement.”\(^31\)

Included in the many goals laid out in the message were concrete proposals to dramatically increase Social Security benefits by twenty percent, raise minimum public assistance standards across the fifty states, significantly overhaul the federal tax code in order to lower the effective tax rate on millions of senior citizens, and finally “a proposal to prohibit discrimination in employment because of age.”\(^32\) Speaking to the press at a briefing about the message, HEW Secretary John


\(^{30}\) Ibid.


Gardner emphasized the scope of the recommendations made in the President’s message, noting that “this breadth and variety reflects very strongly our conviction that the problems of older Americans are extremely complex and will have to be tackled from a lot of different angles.”

Within a week of dispatching the message on older Americans, the Johnson administration reached out to its allies in the labor movement – especially the leadership of the AFL-CIO – to attract the attention and support of union rank-and-file members. Administration officials also reached out to friendly journalists to try and drum up extended, favorable coverage of the President’s message. Their efforts were successful. The New York Times praised it, and positively editorialized that “the elderly do need some kind of intelligent help” from the federal government.

Peering deeper into the presidential message, though, revealed that the type of help which the federal government was now prepared to offer to older people suggested a mixture of new and old approaches to elderly poverty. On the one hand, the President had called for a significant 20 percent increase in Social Security benefits levels as well as a major overhaul of the existing public assistance programs that would “bring the levels of public assistance for all the States at least up to the minimum levels those States themselves provide should be paid,” an explicit recognition that the fragmented character of Social Security’s Old-Age Assistance program as well as other existing federal, state, and local initiatives had either exacerbated or created disparities in publicly supported income maintenance from state to state.

33 Ibid.
36 “Background Briefing: Message on Older Americans,” January 23, 1967, in Box 15, Personal Papers of Harry McPherson, LBJL.
Moving Away from Great Society Liberalism

On the other hand, the President’s proposals would also for the first time “require the States to use the Federal provisions to encourage older Americans who are on welfare to become trained and get jobs, and get off welfare” and would completely overhaul “Federal tax provisions relating to older Americans” in order to lower the overall amount of taxes paid by most elderly people. These two proposals – the first, a requirement that individual states shift older people off of welfare rolls and back into the workforce, and the second, a substantial reduction in taxes collected rather than funds expended on behalf of older people – represented the contours of a new federal approach to resolving economic insecurity in old age, and one which would pick up greater steam in the future.

The proposed tax cut for senior citizens only suggested just how far the administration had come in its embrace of what Michael Harrington had derisively labelled “reactionary Keynesianism.” Three years earlier, the Johnson administration had pressed a large reduction in tax rates through Congress despite strong objections at the time, and had presented them as necessary to stimulate economic growth. Now, the administration recommended targeted tax cuts as a faster and more expedient way to assist older Americans than the frustratingly slow pace of the OEO. Evidence of the administration’s displeasure with OEO’s efforts came during the press briefing announcing the tax cuts when senior Johnson administration officials publicly directed “the appropriate people in the government, most notably the Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, to encourage older Americans…to join in the variety of programs available to provide services to our fellowman.”

The second proposal, to get older Americans “off welfare,” also struck a different public tone than the administration had ever previously expressed. While HEW Under Secretary Wilbur

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37 For Harrington quote, see Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 53.
38 “Background Briefing: Message on Older Americans,” January 23, 1967, in Box 15, Personal Papers of Harry McPherson, LBJL.
Cohen emphasized that “this package that the President is recommending is the most historical since the original law [referring to the 1935 enactment of the Social Security Act]…It is not only the largest in dollars, but I also want to point out that it is the most significant because it has the effect of taking 1.4 million people out of poverty. It is the largest single anti-poverty program that has yet been developed”, it was difficult not to interpret his statement as an implicit rebuke of both Sargent Shriver and the OEO. By raising Social Security benefit levels, Cohen emphasized that the Johnson administration’s overarching goal was to “eliminate overnight 200,000 aged people from welfare rolls. They will be transferred, in other words. They will drop their welfare and they will pick up their Social Security,” a move which, Cohen argued, would result in substantial savings for the States providing old age assistance payments.

While Johnson administration officials were unwilling to expressly admit it, the proposals unveiled in January 1967 signified just how inadequate the administration’s efforts to combat elderly poverty had been. While the enactment of Medicare in 1965 had represented a tremendous step forward, it had become clear that subsidizing the medical and hospitalization bills of people over the age of 65 was insufficient to deal with the other economic issues faced by older people, such as increasingly unaffordable housing, limited access to gainful employment, or social integration into the urban and rural communities in which so many of them lived.

Recognizing that OEO’s efforts to deal with these other problems had, at best, been limited, the Johnson administration decided in January 1967 to focus on broad gauge improvements. OEO’s Foster Grandparents program might only reach a few thousand elderly people, but improvements to Social Security would reach many more. The still-debated senior volunteer corps might reach a few thousand more, but tax cuts would reach millions, and would do so without getting caught in the bureaucratic tripwires which had ensnared and ultimately strangled dozens of other proposals to

39 Ibid.
alleviate the economic and social problems of older people. By embracing these fiscal tools, moreover, the Johnson administration was also rejecting the experimental initiatives which the OEO had embraced to deal with elderly poverty. Notably, the administration did not announce significantly increased funding or new programs to supplement OEO’s already existing slate; instead, it retreated back to methods which were mostly tried and true: expansion of Social Security and targeted tax cuts.

Senior administration officials like Douglass Cater began to take a more in-depth interest in the administration’s efforts to combat elderly poverty. In particular, they began to more critically examine the role that the OEO played in fighting elderly poverty. While the administration could boast substantial achievements, such as the enactment of Medicare and the expansion of Social Security in 1961 and again in 1965, its other legislative accomplishments were considerably more modest. The promise of the Older Americans Act remained largely unfulfilled. Efforts via the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to create rent supplement programs that would allow senior citizens to continue to rent good housing showed encouraging signs of success, but overall the administration’s efforts to combat elderly poverty had remained fragmented and tenuously connected to the OEO and the War on Poverty.40

Eager to change this state of affairs, Cater began the process of reaching out to private voluntary organizations to help the administration advance a more comprehensive domestic policy agenda on behalf of older Americans.41 Rushing to take advantage of this new openness on the part of the Johnson administration, the National Council of Senior Citizens (NCSC) advocated once more for the creation of a senior volunteers corps, a proposal that the Department of Labor as well

40 See Michael Stern to S. Douglass Cater, “Memorandum,” January 19, 1967 in Box 3, President’s Appointment File [Diary Back-Up], 1/1/64-1/31/64, LBJL.
41 Wilbur J. Cohen to Douglass Cater, “Memorandum,” January 23, 1967 in Box 3, President’s Appointment File [Diary Back-Up], 1/1/64-1/31/64, LBJL. See also William Bechill to Douglass Cater, January 23, 1967, in Box 3, President’s Appointment File [Diary Back-Up], 1/1/64-1/31/64, LBJL.
as HEW had been fighting over since the fall of 1966.\textsuperscript{42} As proposed by the NCSC, the senior volunteer corps would consist of a “comprehensive volunteer program to identify individual needs among the older poor.”\textsuperscript{43} In order to accomplish this goal, the NCSC proposed creating “part-time employment for the elderly poor and volunteer community where a large potential of recruits exists through the membership of the well-established, affiliated clubs of the National Council of Senior Citizens.”\textsuperscript{44} Essentially, the program aimed to provide employment to a small number of senior citizens (approximately 2,000) to “locate and identify the needs of 2,000,000 elderly poor,” an ambitious goal but one which built on the success of Project Medicare Alert, a surprisingly successful program hastily assembled by the Johnson administration that had hired several thousand volunteers to enroll senior citizens in Medicare during the year between its enactment in 1965 and its formal launch in 1966.\textsuperscript{45}

Like Project Medicare Alert, the proposed senior volunteer corps would locate and assist elderly poor people and put them in contact with public welfare agencies so that they could register and qualify for government assistance. As an additional benefit, the senior corps would also greatly improve the OEO’s lackluster record combatting elderly poverty; by the NCSC’s reckoning, “in spite of their disproportionately high numbers among the poor – one in five – the elderly poor remain the least visible and the least served by OEO…it is the feeling of the National Council of Senior Citizens.”

\textsuperscript{42} James C. O’Brien to Marvin Watson, “Memorandum,” March 2, 1967, in Box 163, White House Central Files, Oversize Attachment 1113, LBJL.
\textsuperscript{43} “A Proposal for a Senior Volunteer Corps of Volunteers in Service to America, n.d. [1966?], in Box 163, White House Central Files, Oversize Attachment 1113, LBJL.
\textsuperscript{44} “A Proposal for a Senior Volunteer Corps of Volunteers in Service to America, n.d. [1966?], pgs. 2-3, in Box 163, White House Central Files, Oversize Attachment 1113, LBJL.
Senior Citizens...that not enough has been done to meet the needs of the elderly poor.”

Positioning itself as the organization best suited to meet these needs, the NCSC emphasized that its 2,000 affiliated clubs “have benefited from the organizations democratically-governed structure assuring autonomy of older people in harmony with the national interest,” perhaps harkening back to the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act’s original legislative aim of promoting “maximum feasible participation” by poor people.

Even as the administration continued to debate the merits of the NCSC’s proposed plan, similar initiatives were being rapidly implemented. In March 1967, in conjunction with the OEO, the National Council on Aging launched Project FIND, a new program designed to reach “the friendless, isolated needy and disabled” (per its name). Project FIND employed older men and women to go “door-to-door and farm-to-farm” to help locate impoverished elderly people and to educate them about the “kind of health and welfare services...available to them.” Project FIND was the brainchild of Jack Ossofsky, an OEO official, who expressed his hope that “based on the experiences of FIND, some community services may be revised and senior centers may be established to meet the health, educational and recreational need of the elderly.”

In essence, by using the elderly to help the elderly, Project FIND aimed to solve two problems at once. It would provide a limited number of employment opportunities for some older Americans, and in so doing it would allow local, state, and federal welfare officials to locate thousands of elderly people who might benefit from the growing number of programs designed to lift them out of poverty. Project FIND’s reach was limited by both its small size and limited funds – even the OEO expected that it would at most reach 200,000 people out of an estimated total

46 “A Proposal for a Senior Volunteer Corps of Volunteers in Service to America, n.d. [1966?], pg. 4, in Box 163, White House Central Files, Oversize Attachment 1113, LBJL.
47 Ibid., 5.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
population of 5.3 million elderly people living below the poverty line – but as Mr. Ossofsky’s statement to the New York Times had hinted, officials in OEO and elsewhere hoped that it would be an important first step in the right direction.

Meanwhile, the administration, in conjunction with the AFL-CIO, sought to drum up support for other measures designed to alleviate elderly poverty. AFL-CIO sponsored rallies featured a filmed talk of President Johnson stressing the need to raise Social Security payments by 20%, “with a minimum of at least $150 a month for retired couples and $100 for individuals with 25 years of coverage” that would, by the estimate of the Social Security Administration, lift “1,400,000 citizens” out of poverty within a year’s time.51 Unlike the few millions of dollars given to OEO for Project FIND, the administration’s proposals to expand Social Security amounted to roughly $4.1 billion, a figure which Johnson took pains to remind the press was “nearly five times greater than the major increase in 1950 and almost six times greater than the increase of 1961.”52

The administration’s renewed interest in elderly poverty may have been stimulated by mounting evidence that, despite the hopes of Medicare’s architects that that program would provide a new baseline of economic security for older Americans, the problem of old-age poverty had proven to be significantly more intractable than it had first appeared to be. In part, the dramatic contrast between the massive amount of spending for the war in Vietnam and the relatively lower amount of funds being expended on behalf of the Great Society’s domestic programs had also unexpectedly propelled the issue of old-age poverty back to the front pages of the nation’s newspapers. Congressional hearings held in May 1967, for example, had revealed that the rising costs of prescription drugs had created another widening financial gyre that many senior citizens


52 Ibid.
were falling into; it would not be the last time that the Senate would hear about older people having to choose between “having enough to eat and getting the medicine they need.”

While declining to criticize the administration’s spending priorities, HEW Secretary John Gardner echoed similar sentiments during his testimony before a House subcommittee hearing in early May 1967. Speaking to the assembled congressmen, Gardner pressed the administration’s case for a series of amendments to the Older Americans Act to help combat the “many and varied” problems faced by older people. As Gardner observed, “the problems faced by older people today are many and varied: low income, poor housing; inadequate access to medical, health, and other community facilities; and a separation from…the rest of our mobile, work-oriented, youth-centered society.” In response to these problems, Gardner argued that

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\text{we must meet these needs in an interrelated way. Health services must be buttressed by adequate housing, and adequate housing assured through income security. And there must be educational, recreational, and community services that afford substance and meaning to life for the older person, his neighbors, and his community.}
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In order to “meet these needs in an interrelated way,” Gardner argued that the proposed Older Americans Act Amendments of 1967 would greatly assist in this task by providing for an extension of the grant provisions of the original Older Americans Act of 1965, and by increasing the amount of authorized funding available to carry out the grant programs which operated under the original law. Such increases were necessary, Gardner stated, “to continue the constructive action by all levels of government and voluntary organizations that has taken place during the first nineteen

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
months of the program.”57 As Gardner further explained, the funding provided by the legislation had made possible a fruitful collaboration between the federal government and local institutions throughout the country, and had assisted “the States in their responsibilities to meet and stimulate community action.”58 In other words, the legislation was supporting successful community action programs, and enjoyed support and cooperation from the local government officials and private voluntary organizations that possessed the power to make or break the efficacy of such programs.

Speaking before the NCSC two weeks later, Gardner reiterated the case he had made before Congress for the expansion of the Older Americans Act. In colorful prose, Gardner explained the administration’s philosophical approach to the problems of older Americans:

People love to talk about the good old days when every family “took care of its own” aged members. But an honest account of the good old days would have to include reference to the number of old folks who, in the phrase of the times, went “over the hill to the poorhouse.” It would have to include reference to the large number of old people who were, in fact, unwilling and unhappy mendicants in their own family. In the good old days we had the gift of hypocrisy and we could close our eyes to uncomfortable facts.59

Condemning these “good old days,” Gardner argued that “if we’re not going to be hypocritical about these things, then we must admit that we still have much to accomplish…we like to think that we’ve broken the ancient and universal link between age and poverty, but we haven’t.”60

It was therefore necessary, Gardner argued, that Social Security and other programs for the elderly be improved: “Social Security was designed to be our first line of defense against poverty. That line has become shockingly thin…We all know that in spite of social security, one-half of our

57 Ibid., 3.
58 Ibid., 4.
60 Ibid., 2.
older people have incomes below or near the poverty line – close to 10 million people.”61 Imploring the assembled NCSC members, Gardner plainly stated “we need your involvement and participation – at the national level and in every community.”62 Gardner’s words came at an opportune time, and helped to build the administration’s case for its agenda by reinserting the issue of elderly poverty back into general circulation. Sign of the growing interest in elderly poverty cropped up in prominent places: in early June 1967, for example, the *New York Times* reported that “inflation and the failure of pensions to keep pace with rising pay are causing such deterioration in the living standards of retired persons that at least half exist below the poverty line.63

After receiving signals from Capitol Hill that the administration’s proposed Older Americans Act Amendments legislation would find minimal opposition, Gardner and the administration pressed ahead.64 While not nearly as high-profile as the enactment of Medicare two years earlier, the amendments signified the success of the administration’s low-key, incremental approach to using the power of the federal government to address economic insecurity in old age. Despite the lack of flair, this quiet approach to policy enactment represented “a very major attack on the problems of poverty in our older group,” in the words of Wilbur Cohen.65 As Cohen explained during a 1967 press briefing, “this package that the President is recommending is the most historical since the original [Social Security] law…it is the most significant because it has the effect of taking

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
1.4 million people out of poverty. It is the largest single anti-poverty program that has yet been developed.”66

Cohen’s words suggested that administration had not yet given up on the War on Poverty. Rather, it was belatedly taking the advice of liberal critics such as economist Leon Keyserling that it was more likely to win both popular backing and congressional approval for social welfare legislation that built on successful past track records (i.e., Social Security). That the proposed improvements to Social Security did not challenge either local political autonomy or existing arrangements of racial power was not overtly stated by Wilbur Cohen or others, but an increasingly weary Johnson administration was probably eager to shift the focus of the War on Poverty away from OEO and its controversial community action programs that had attracted intense criticism in the press and from some local politicians who viewed the agency as an unwelcome interloper.

By mid-July 1967, Cohen could happily report to Johnson that “we are doing very well” and that “Chairman Mills has been most cooperative” with regards to the administration’s pending Social Security legislation, which proposed that Social Security benefits be increased by 13% but also authorized “a much stronger program to encourage assistance recipients to become independent through work and training.”67 Cohen noted that “it will be a big and comprehensive bill,” and assured Johnson that “I am confident that it will be a bill you will be very proud of and want to take credit for in 1968,” a not so subtle nudge to the president’s still unresolved plans for the 1968 presidential election.68

As it turned out, Johnson ended up signing legislation that authorized a 20% rise in Social Security benefits, far higher than the 13% figure that Cohen had cited in his earlier report to the

66 Ibid.
67 Douglass Cater to Lyndon B. Johnson, Ways and Means Committee Tentative Actions on the Social Security Bill, July 14, 1967, in Box 16, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.
68 Wilbur Cohen to Lyndon Johnson, Memorandum, July 14, 1967, in Box 16, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.
President.69 Additionally, Johnson signed the Older Americans Act Amendments in July 1967, thus realizing the goal set in motion the previous fall by Joseph Califano. The new amendments authorized $43 million in new federal spending (approximately $300 million in 2017 dollars) and funded the creation of hundreds of new research, community, and pilot projects throughout the nation “to improve the quality of life for their aged [populations].”70 These community projects included “the establishment of centers for senior citizens for recreation, education, and counseling activities,” that built on the long-established success of such centers in combatting elderly loneliness and forging safe, communal spaces for older people in municipalities like New York City.71

Alongside efforts to improve employment opportunities for older workers as well as individuals already in retirement, other proposals circulating within the Johnson administration envisioned a further bolstering of the Older Americans Act to launch new initiatives in the areas of leisure, education, and community service for older Americans. These proposals, while modest in individual funding and size, collectively suggested a new comprehensive federal approach to the problems of older Americans that did not view them simply as sickly wards of the state. Rather, the new approach shepherded by Califano, Cohen, and Gardner emphasized the potential productivity of older Americans as an untapped source of manpower that, if properly utilized, could do a tremendous amount of good in communities throughout the nation, regardless of race or socio-economic background.

Not content to rest on their laurels after the successful enactment of the 1967 Older Americans Act Amendments, administration officials continued to quietly prod the various task

71 Douglass Cater to Lyndon B. Johnson, Memorandum, June 30, 1967, Box 16, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.
forces examining the problems of older Americans to devise proposals for short and long term policy solutions that went beyond Social Security and Medicare. The newest administration Task Force on Older Americans, for example, was advised that the Johnson’s administration’s primary concern “is with the opportunities which are available to retired persons during the 10, 15, or 20 years of productive life which they have after retirement…this is becoming increasingly important as life expectancies increase and retirement ages are lowered.”72 In particular, the Task Force was urged to “look at the abilities and disabilities of older persons” as well as the “steps which the Federal Government should take to increase the opportunities” available for older persons.73

Besides lobbying the Task Force, Joseph Califano urged HEW Secretary John W. Gardner to begin preparing “a detailed outline of new initiatives which might be proposed in 1968 for Older Americans,” and suggested items such as better health care for the elderly, educational programs for the elderly, improved health and safety standards in public housing projects for the elderly and finally the growth of the underdeveloped Senior Centers program originally created by enactment of the Older Americans Act in 1965.74 Other memoranda dispatched by Califano to Gardner urged the “development of model systems providing comprehensive social, medical, and rehabilitative services for the elderly,” preferably using “existing authorities” rather than by creating new ones.75

The American Community Services Force

Increasingly, key Johnson administration officials began in 1967 through 1968 to coalesce around a proposed American Community Services Force (ACSF), which, as gerontologist Robert H. 72 Confidential Memorandum to Charles Stauffacher, August 24, 1967, in Box 98, White House Confidential File, WE/MC, LBJL.
73 Ibid.
75 Joseph A. Califano to John W. Gaithier, “Eyes Only Memorandum,” November 10, 1967, in Box 136, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
Binstock, the chairman of the administration’s 1968 Task Force on Older Americans observed, “will emphasize its service function, not its employment function” in the hope that it would not be rejected as a kind of degrading dole for older people. Binstock argued that “the ACSF not only holds more potential for actually helping people, but also is likely to be more politically sounds for meeting Great Society goals.” In essence, the ACSF was a service program loosely modeled in part on the Peace Corps and billed as “an innovative program for providing older persons with a genuine opportunity to make constructive contributions to community and national life while earning adequate income.” The ambitions which the Task Force attached to the proposed ACSF were expansive. If all went according to plan, the ACSF would “create a manpower force, ultimately comparable in scale and priority to our defense forces that can take its place in American life as a basic resource for meeting the critical personnel shortages facing all major human service institutions and agencies.”

Ultimately, the proposed ACSF would be a “nationwide confederation of community programs,” suggesting the Johnson administration’s continuing commitment to a locally based efforts to mitigate elderly poverty, albeit in a way that echoed but did not directly use the now controversial “community action program” model employed by the Office of Economic Opportunity. If the goal of achieving a “major improvement in the effectiveness and operations of social service provision” was to be met, the ACSF would have to consist of “a new, locally-incorporate nonprofit organization which would function as a major resource in its community for

76 Robert H. Binstock to James C. Gaither, “Eyes Only Memorandum,” December 8, 1967, in Box 136, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
77 Ibid.
78 “Summary Report of the President’s Task Force on Older Americans,” June 1968, in White House Central Files, Subject File, EX FG 600 / Task Force / Natural Beauty, Box 366 in LBJL.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
providing human services,” with those services to be provided by trained and compensated staff. In addition, the “national ACSF would have special mechanisms to ensure participation and protection for disadvantaged groups in each community,” with “long-run funding [to] come mostly from coordination of resources already available through existing federal grant programs.”

Examined as a whole, the proposed ACSF effectively promised to accomplish two objectives: first, it would distance the Johnson administration’s efforts to combat elderly poverty at the local, community-level away from the OEO’s now racially-tinged community action program. Secondly, it would indirectly create new employment opportunities for older, unemployed workers with otherwise limited options. It did not propose to create jobs via direct hiring by the federal government; rather, by using the middleman of “community programs” funded by “existing federal grant programs,” it would camouflage such efforts, so as to steer carefully around arousing concerns that the ACSF was little more than a dole or unwarranted charity for old people with limited capacity to be productive workers. In order to avoid doing so, the ACSF “would give many persons who are at the height of their productivity and maturity a dignified opportunity to work side-by-side with Americans of all ages and backgrounds, in contributing high-quality, widely-respected, and critically-needed public services.” What exactly this meant remained undisclosed; it was far more important that the program present “dignified opportunities” if it was to be politically viable as public backlash to the War on Poverty continued to mount throughout 1967 and 1968.

While the ACSF’s backers had high aspirations for the proposed program, it actually represented a truncated version of a public employment proposal that had been circulating within the administration for nearly two years. In late October 1966, administration officials had debated whether or not to push for a more aggressive public program designed to provide employment for

81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
older workers between the ages of 45 and 64. This unnamed and unrealized program would have offered full-time employment for

    [a]ll men and women who are heads of households, who have been unemployed for long periods (a half year or more) or who are in the lowest income farm groups, and who are not enrolled in MDTA [Manpower and Development Training Act of 1962] or other remedial programs would be offered employment in constructive public projects operated by local, state, or federal agencies.

The estimated cost for the proposed mass public employment of these older workers was substantial, with a range of $225 to $700 million annually (1966 dollars), depending on the wage rate and the number of people re-employed. Depending on the final cost, the program would have potentially represented between four to ten percent of the entire federal budget; for the sake of comparison, the U.S. spent approximately $747 million on defense expenditures during the 1966-1967 fiscal year.

Despite the high price tag associated with such a program, there remained a case to be made for it: “the principal immediate victims of advancing technology and the shifting occupational pattern are the unemployed whose ages range from 45 to 64…they have the least education, the fewest skills of a transferrable nature, and they often reside in the regions of least economic development potential…for many, a decade or two remain before hope of ‘retirement’ on Social Security.” Continuing in the same vein, “the government now has an impressive number of economic development, anti-poverty, and manpower development programs, some of which include direct public employment of youth and adults,” but “older workers are not benefitting at rates

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84 “Organization and Interagency Coordination of Programs and Advisory Committees for the Aging and Related Program Areas,” October 20, 1966 in Box 61, Office Files of Joseph A. Califano, LBJL.
85 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
anywhere near their proportionate share of need.” If implemented as proposed, the program would open up new employment opportunities for both rural and urban workers, and would build on the limited success achieved by earlier initiatives to retrain workers which had been carried out under the provisions of the Public Works Acceleration Act signed by President Kennedy in 1962.

At the same time, the fact that these programs were so disparate and fragmented across numerous agencies in the federal government made it much more difficult for them not to get lost in the mix. In 1965, the original Older Americans Act had authorized the creation of an Administration on Aging (AoA) for precisely this purpose of supervising the federal government’s initiatives, but most of the existing Executive Branch departments and agencies seemed far more committed to advancing their own programs rather than to surrendering valuable policy turf or limited funds to the AoA.

There had been a similar pattern of resistance to the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), that some administration officials had questioned the need for, but unlike the AoA, the OEO enjoyed the direct support of President Johnson as well as a high-profile, well-connected leader in Sargent Shriver, the former director of the Peace Corps. AoA, on the other hand, was led by William Bechill, a well-meaning social worker and public servant who was largely unknown outside of select governmental circles in California, where he had formerly been employed in that state’s large public welfare apparatus. In addition to being an outsider to national politics, Bechill did not enjoy the strong support of organized labor, which had pushed instead for Charles Odell or James O’Brien, both of whom had strong links to the AFL-CIO’s leadership.

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88 Ibid., 3-4.
Unlike the attention he gave to the OEO, Johnson appears to have barely paid any attention to the AoA; likewise, most of his senior aides frequently seemed to be indifferent or passively hostile to the AoA’s very existence.

Such bureaucratic indifference helped ensure that the AoA’s efforts to impose some sort of order or coherence to the federal government’s approach to aging policy would be a thankless task for all those involved. The mid-level staff in the well-established Departments of Labor and Health, Education, and Welfare – the two departments whose turf was most threatened by the existence of the AoA – largely sidelined the AoA in favor of pursuing their own agency plans. No attempt to correct this willful construction of administrative silos was made for the first two years of the AoA’s existence. The death of Senator Patrick V. McNamara, the main senatorial sponsor of the Older Americans Act, in April 1966 accelerated the AoA’s plunge into irrelevancy. Without any powerful voice to speak on its behalf, the conversation about old-age poverty and economic insecurity in the Johnson administration remained firmly welded to fickle swings of senior-level administrative favor or disfavor.

It was not until after the successful implementation of Medicare in 1966 that the Johnson administration turned its attention more fully to investigating how the Older Americans Act could be used in a more effective manner to address elderly poverty. Johnson administration officials, many of whom were eager to seize an opportunity to demonstrate the Great Society’s commitment to older Americans, began to swiftly integrate the AoA into domestic policy initiatives which the administration was already pursuing. In short order, its staff members soon found themselves posted to various Johnson administration task forces on older Americans, nursing home reform, income maintenance, among others. In particular, William Bechill, the AoA’s commissioner, was placed

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92 See, for example, “Task Force on Nursing Homes and Other Institutions for the Care of the Elderly,” November 28, 1966 in Box 67, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.
on nearly every administration task force that could conceivably recommend policy proposals for older Americans, which left him little time to actually administer the AoA and help steer it among the rocky shoals of the federal bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{93}

While the Johnson administration at times seemed to equate the proliferation of presidential task forces with concrete policy achievements, by 1967 the administration decided to begin utilizing the AoA more fully. As a 1967 confidential executive memo outlined, the Johnson administration planned to increase the AoA’s staffing by a third, and to nearly triple its dedicated budgetary appropriations by 1970.\textsuperscript{94} Such a prediction, of course, assumed that either the Johnson administration (or some other similarly-inclined administration) would still be in power by 1970 to ensure that the AoA’s funding and staff were increased, but it is still indicative of the way in which, by 1967, the Johnson administration had come to embrace an agency which had largely been foisted upon it by Congress. Moreover, the executive memo suggested why the AoA was now being embraced: namely, the ability to use it to allocate state grants for “community planning, services, and training,” activities which might have been performed by the OEO, had that agency not already under heavy fire and in growing disrepute among elected officials and the general public. However belatedly, the Johnson administration was coming to endorse a method for providing assistance which it had tried to avoid when it had launched the War on Poverty three years earlier in 1964.

Indeed, even as other administration anti-poverty initiatives faltered, the Johnson administration’s plans for new programs and initiatives on behalf of older Americans showed no signs of slowing down. By September 1967, the administration had identified a list of policy priorities for older Americans that it would pursue during the upcoming congressional session. The administration opted to push for the expansion of “comprehensive social-medical-rehabilitative

\textsuperscript{93} Philip R. Lee, M.D., Memorandum, November 23, 1966 in Box 67, Office Files of Douglass Cater, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{94} “Information Memorandum,” April 17, 1967, in White House Central Files, Oversize Attachment #1281, Box 191, LBJL. 
facilities and services for the aged” as well as a nonspecific “expansion of grant programs under the Older Americans Act” as its highest priorities. The previously much debated Older Americans Community Service program occupied the lowest place on the list of the administration’s priority proposals, buried beneath increased federal funds for “university based institutes of gerontology” and “elimination of environmental and architectural barriers to the handicapped and elderly.”

The administration’s priorities reflected a continuing shift towards local-level programs and demonstration projects rather than a grand, unified vision of national programs. The proposed “comprehensive social-medical-rehabilitative facilities and services for the aged,” for example, sought to establish model systems of comprehensive community, social, medical, and rehabilitative services for the elderly by “coordinating existing community facilities and services, adding limited construction and modest program development where necessary.” The administration hoped that these model systems would offer a workable solution to the “inadequate” number of facilities and services for the aged and chronically ill throughout the country, a situation which it termed “an urgent necessity.”

By funding the construction of experimental newly enhanced facilities which incorporated “innovative approaches to both design of facilities and development of programs,” the Johnson administration then hoped to successfully promote these models as “capable of extension to other communities.” At its heart, this proposal emphasized local government and community efforts at the forefront, with the federal government playing a background role as a facilitator to coordinate existing community facilities and services without subsuming those roles. Ultimately, the Johnson administration hoped that this system of federal-local cooperation and coordination to improve

95 “List of Proposals for Older Americans, 1968,” September 19, 1967, in Box 77, Office Files of Joseph A. Califano, LBJL.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
services could be extended nationwide, and would “enable all older Americans to have access to facilities and services which will sustain independent living.”\textsuperscript{100}

\section*{Shifting Gears}

This new direction in federal policy suggested that the Johnson administration had, for the most part, decided to channel its efforts into low-profile, local-level efforts rather than high-stakes and controversial national legislation like Medicare. By quietly funding grant programs under the Older Americans Act and other related pieces of legislation, the Johnson administration aimed to give the federal government the means to support the growth of a social service infrastructure in communities throughout the country, and to thereby build on the existing framework of state and local welfare agencies. In the case of programs funded under the provisions of the Older Americans Act, the federal government would fund up to 75\% of a project’s cost on a continuing basis; as an internal administration report noted, “continuing support is necessary since the communities do not have sufficient financial resources to maintain these services without assistance” and would help achieve “the goal of readily available services for older people at the community level.”\textsuperscript{101}

At a November 1967 meeting, top Cabinet officials pondered new programs for older Americans.\textsuperscript{102} The meeting had its origins in a highly confidential “eyes only” memorandum that Joseph Califano had sent to HEW Secretary John Gardner three months earlier in August 1967, in which Califano subtly suggested to Gardner that

\begin{quote}
It would be helpful if you would submit…a detailed outline of new initiatives which might be proposed in 1968 for Older Americans. Consideration should be given to items such as better health care for the elderly…educational programs for the elderly…health and safety standard in public housing projects for the elderly and in housing occupied by public assistance recipients…expansion of the Senior
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{102} “Older Americans Meeting,” November 10, 1967, in Box 61, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
Centers program. Furthermore, you are encouraged to add any other proposal which you feel is worthy of consideration.103

In response, Gardner submitted a list of fifteen proposals, with the highest priority placed on “comprehensive social-medical-rehabilitative facilities and services for the aged,” which an internal report summarized as a “specialized CAP [Community Action Program]-type agency similar to that proposed under juvenile delinquency bill” on a pilot basis with modest funding from the federal government to see if there was sufficient support to sustain it.104 Additionally, Gardner recommended that funding be made available to provide better training to nursing home administrators and overall increased support to the Older Americans Act’s grant-making program.105

While none of these recommendations had the broad, dramatic sweep of Medicare or Social Security, the administration’s determination to try and rework the community action program suggested that it was searching for a way to relaunch and reframe the War on Poverty, and to do so in a way that would elicit public support rather than derision and condemnation. As HEW’s senior leadership was well-aware, the nation’s facilities and services for the aged and chronically ill were “inadequate in number and distribution throughout the country, inadequately staffed where they exist, and poorly coordinated.”106 To remedy this situation, the administration therefore proposed the establishment “at the local level [of] a coordinating agency which can receive and disburse private and public funds from local and State governments and also act as a conduit for Federal

103 Joseph Califano to John W. Gardner, August 21, 1967, in Box 61, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
104 Greg Barlous to James Gaither, November 3, 1967, in Box 61, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
105 Ibid., 2.
106 “Comprehensive Social-Medical-Rehabilitative Facilities and Services for the Aged: A Community Program,” September 19th, 1967, in Box 61, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
funds.” 107 The establishment of this new, local-level coordinating agency would “tie together existing community facilities and services, and add necessary elements where lacking.” 108

In other words, the administration seemed to have finally recognized that it would have to work with state and local officials if it wanted its reboot of the War on Poverty’s Community Action Program to succeed, but the modest amounts of funding (approximately $10 million in 1969 dollars) and support (a 3-5 year initially funded lifespan for the agency) allocated to this new initiative suggested that the administration had accepted more limited achievements instead of the broad abolition of poverty it had sought nearly four years earlier when Johnson had declared an “unconditional war against poverty.” 109

At the same time, while the administration may have backed off of its embrace of the War on Poverty in order to more fully pursue the Vietnam War, its more limited domestic policy ambitions still contained hints of its former and broader ambitions. John Gardner’s 1967 proposal to remake the nation’s facilities and services for senior citizens explicitly aspired to “enable all older Americans to have access to facilities and services which will sustain independent living; assure that each elderly person receives the right care, at the right place, at the right time; provide better and more appropriate social, medical, and rehabilitative facilities and services for the elderly; and reduce the cost of services to the elderly and the community by the use of appropriate alternatives to institutional care.” 110 As Gardner and other Johnson administration officials recognized, “many agencies public and private, business and labor, will need to be involved to make the program

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 2.
110 “Comprehensive Social-Medical-Rehabilitative Facilities and Services for the Aged: A Community Program,” September 19th, 1967, pg. 3, in Box 61, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
work,” but that it was a program which only the federal government with its broad national reach could tackle with at least a modicum of hope for success.\textsuperscript{111}

Moreover, such an expansion of federal activity on behalf of older Americans at the local level would also finally give a semblance of purpose to the AoA, which had occupied a kind of legislative limbo somewhere in between what its congressional sponsors had intended for it and the chaotic mess which the Johnson administration had left it in.\textsuperscript{112} The breadth of programs and agencies involved was formidable, and the administration’s determination to convert the Older Americans Act via legislative amendments into a much more significant piece of legislation than it had been when it was enacted in 1965 was increasingly obvious.\textsuperscript{113}

By mid-December 1967, the Johnson administration had assembled its list of legislative and budgetary items that it would use to advance its agenda on behalf of older Americans in 1968. Gardner’s original list of fifteen items had been narrowed down to five, but still retained key proposals to “expand demonstration program especially for nutrition (no means test), transportation services, and rehabilitation centers,” with the stipulation that “most of these items should be directed toward low income and minority-group elderly.” At the same time, the administration’s more cautious instincts were also vividly on display. The same memo identifying the administration’s top

\textsuperscript{111} As the September 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1967 memo noted, “perhaps the primary reason why this problem has not been met in more than a sporadic way is because it involves part of the programs of so many organizations…what is needed is an approach under which one organization, in this case the Administration on Aging, takes the lead with a specific legislative program, with earmarked funds, to bring together the diverse interests into one cohesive program and one where those responsible for action are known and made accountable for the success of the program,” (Ibid., 4).

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. Many of Gardner’s proposals – especially those marked as higher priority items – explicitly or tacitly were assigned to the Administration on Aging’s bailiwick.

\textsuperscript{113} See for example, the administration’s proposals to expand State-level grant programs for older Americans in “Expansion of Grant Programs under the Older Americans Act,” pgs. 1-2, September 20, 1967; a national consumer education program to “be developed under…the Older Americans Act” to “provide information to older people that will enable them to use their limited income and savings effectively” in “Consumer Education for Older Americans,” pgs. 1-2, September 22, 1967; the construction of multipurpose senior centers via the Administration on Aging in “Senior Centers” pgs. 2-3, September 19, 1967; funding to develop improved transportation options for the elderly in “Transportation Services for Older People,” pgs. 1-2, September 20, 1967, and the creation of a “national community senior service program” in order “to provide both employment opportunities for older people and a meaningful structure for the utilization of the abilities, experience, training, and skills of older Americans in community services programs developed under the Older Americans Act” in “Older Americans Community Service Program,” pgs. 1-2, September 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1967, among others; all in Box 61, Office Files of James Gaither, LBJL.
five policy priorities for older Americans also cautioned that while the proposals “give expression to a Federal-State partnership role which focuses attention on the problems of the elderly,” it was understood that such expression was made “without committing us, at this time, to a permanent large-scale categorical program of services.”

In essence, the administration had decided to take a more experimental approach to the problem of old-age poverty by supporting existing state and local level programs as well as a few demonstration projects, the latter of which it hoped would renew interest in using the federal government’s tools and resources to ameliorate poverty. Behind closed doors, administration officials hoped that this limited policy agenda would permit “a general introduction of the idea during 1968, for the purpose of orienting that nation to a vision of the future, in which American life is characterized by a full scale mobilization of human resources for service to one’s fellow man,” a sentiment that remained largely confined to the private memoranda circulated internally among Johnson aides.

That such sentiments were largely not acted upon reflected both on the limited ambit for movement that the administration now possessed, but it also suggested mounting difficulties within the administration itself over how best to proceed. The Bureau of the Budget, in particular, was increasingly pugnacious in its confrontations with HEW and other departments over how to alleviate poverty among older Americans. In a confidential memo to James Gaither, a Special Assistant to President Johnson, Irving Lewis of the Bureau of the Budget bluntly stated that

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114 Irving J. Lewis to James Gaither, December 15, 1967, in Box 61, Papers of James Gaither, LBJL. (Underlining in the original document.)

115 Specifically, William Bechill, the Commissioner of the Administration on Aging, described these demonstration projects as “special transportation services for older people, consumer information and protection, and a national demonstration in rehabilitative work center opportunities for persons 60 years of age and over no longer in the regular work force, with particular reference to the low income and minority group older citizen.” See William Bechill to James Gaither, December 14, 1967, pg. 2, in Box 61, Papers of James Gaither, LBJL.

116 See, for example, Robert H. Binstock to James C. Gaither, “Eyes Only” Memorandum, December 14, 1967, in Box 61, Papers of James Gaither, LBJL.
[w]e recommend against most of the specific HEW legislative proposals for 1968. In essence, they would add up to an Administration commitment to a permanent categorical program of services for the elderly. Such a program is not needed and could be a budgetary nightmare. The Administration should be stimulating and promoting the development and expansion of programs by public and private agencies – providing “glue” money through HEW – not proliferating new grant programs...We recommend instead a more tightly targeted program with two objectives.”

Lewis argued that the Administration would be most likely to succeed if it “strengthen[ed] the ability of State agencies on aging” with enhanced funding that would permit them to “survey and plan comprehensively and continuously for the needs of the elderly, utilizing ‘glue’ money from HEW to plug gaps in existing efforts and demonstrate new approaches” and to “give programs for older Americans an opportunity to become better established in local communities” by extending the lifespan of subsidizing grants made to such programs under the provisions of the Older Americans Act.

In other words, the Bureau was recommending that the administration permanently back away from the more aggressive proposals made by Gardner and others to expand the direct role of the federal government in addressing the needs of the elderly poor. Instead, the Bureau was urging that the federal government buttress its indirect role by supporting existing state, local, and private agencies concerned with the problems of the elderly poor. In the Bureau’s view, such an approach would allow the federal government to avoid duplicating and possibly rendering redundant the efforts of state, local, and private agencies, and would also leave the federal government with a freer hand to decrease or withdraw from this policy area as needed.

Ultimately, the infighting between the Bureau, HEW, and the Department of Labor over the administration’s priorities delayed the kind of broad, sweeping action that John Gardner and Joseph

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117 Irving J. Lewis to James Gaither, December 8, 1967, pgs. 3-4 in Box 61, Papers of James Gaither, LBJL.
118 Ibid., 4.
Califano had hoped for. One by one, HEW’s recommendations – whether they were for a comprehensive senior community service program, comprehensive work centers for older people, or sponsoring the construction of multi-purpose senior centers – met with the same unforgiving response by the Bureau: “we oppose.”\(^{119}\) The Bureau could not be dislodged from its insistent and oft-repeated position that the broad initiatives proposed by other executive branch agencies would commit the administration to “another permanent categorical grant program of vague and unformed purpose and content,” which the Bureau feared would not pass muster in an increasingly skeptical Congress.\(^ {120}\)

Despite the Bureau’s opposition, Wilbur Cohen, who had replaced John Gardner as Secretary of HEW in early 1968, was determined to press forward with his list of proposed actions that the administration could take. In order to do so, Cohen turned to the recommendations made by the administration’s Task Force on Older Americans.\(^ {121}\) As originally proposed, the main objective of the Task Force was, in Joseph Califano’s words, to “take a look at ‘second career’ opportunities for retired persons during the 10, 15, or 20 years of productive life after retirement.”\(^ {122}\) Consequently, the Task Force’s main recommendations emphasized expanding employment opportunities to retired persons as well as stronger action to address the income needs of older Americans.\(^ {123}\) Specifically, the Task Force recommended that the Johnson administration press for a “federal retirement supplement to guarantee a minimum annual income” as well as stronger regulation of private pensions and “expanded training programs for older workers.”\(^ {124}\)

\(^{119}\) Ibid., Attachment B.
\(^{120}\) See Irving J. Lewis to Joseph Califano, November 24, 1967, in Box 61, Papers of James Gaither, LBJL.
\(^{121}\) Joseph Califano to LBJ, July 26, 1968, in White House Central Files, Subject File, EX FG 600 / Task Force / Natural Beauty, Box 366 in LBJL.
\(^{122}\) Joseph Califano to Lyndon B. Johnson, “Memorandum,” October 13, 1966, in White House Central Files, Subject File, EX FG 600 / Task Force / Natural Beauty, Box 366 in LBJL.
\(^{123}\) Joseph Califano to LBJ, July 9, 1968, in White House Central Files, Subject File, EX FG 600 / Task Force / Natural Beauty, Box 366 in LBJL.
\(^{124}\) Ibid.
In early October 1968, after exchanging correspondence with Califano, Cohen had readied his list of new initiatives to assist older Americans. As Cohen wrote in one of his memos to Califano, the main priorities were to strengthen Social Security and Medicare. “The most far-reaching and significant proposals are those made with respect to improvement of the Social Security cash benefit program and Medicare,” Cohen wrote, though he also added that “one of our national goals for older people should be the building of a national network of opportunities and services to enhance their participation in community life.” In order to build this network, Cohen argued that the administration continue availing itself of the recently strengthened Older Americans Act.

Continuing in that vein, Cohen proposed a “Bill of Rights for Older Americans” that offered up a grand vision of the federal government using its vast resources to nearly singlehandedly resolve the problems facing older Americans, ranging from providing adequate retirement income and extending Medicare to cover the cost of prescription drugs to improving housing programs and employment opportunities for older Americans. Many of these proposals had been debated within the various parts of the Johnson administration for years. Cohen’s proposal therefore represented the latest attempt to tie them together as a comprehensive plan. Strikingly, the assembled items were projected to cost the federal government at best a marginal amount of money, with some prominent exceptions such as raising Social Security benefits and expanding Medicare’s range. The costs for those two items, though, were considerable. Expanding Medicare to include prescription drugs would cost the federal government an additional $300 million per year (1968 dollars), and raising

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125 Wilbur J. Cohen to Joseph Califano, October 5, 1968, in Box 39, Office Files of Joseph A. Califano, LBJL.
126 Ibid.
Social Security’s benefits level would require raising payroll taxes or taking money from elsewhere in the federal government, neither of which were particularly attractive options.127

Aside from Social Security and Medicare, though, Cohen pressed for a dramatic expansion of the Older Americans Act. Observing that during the past three years the federal government had already begun funding over eight hundred local programs in communities scattered throughout the nation, Cohen argued that significant increases to the Older Americans Act would “enable States and communities to improve and expand projects in such areas as community planning, senior centers, homemaker services, special transportation services, recreation and leisure time, in-service training, and counseling services,” – essentially, a wish list of local, anti-poverty programs.128 Cohen pegged the proposed amount to be expended to fund such increases at a range between $37 and $50 million (1968 dollars), a significant sum but one that still stood at roughly one-tenth of the amount proposed for expanding Medicare.

Taken together, Cohen’s proposals embraced a vision of vigorous, activist government working on behalf of the nation’s elderly, and providing them with opportunities to contribute to society which dwarfed the possibilities on offer by private voluntary organizations as well as state and local governments. For Cohen, the elderly were not merely sickly pensioners; rather, they had the potential to be a vast reservoir of manpower that the nation could call upon to help solve other pressing social problems. For example, Cohen envisioned a dramatic enlargement of the Foster Grandparents Program, a hitherto small program which matched isolated, elderly people with abandoned or neglected children in hospitals, orphanages, and other institutions. Cohen proposed that the Foster Grandparents program be subsumed under the “Service Roles in Retirement” program first established by the Older Americans Act three years earlier. As he wrote in a memo to

127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
Joseph Califano, “there is substantial evidence that large numbers of older people living in retirement are capable and interested in contributing their skills and services to various areas of community betterment and services,” and, ideally, the Service Roles in Retirement program would “meet the tremendous needs that exist in this area.” In other words, enlarging the Older Americans Act with an expanded Service Roles in Retirement program would create a virtuous cycle in which retired, older people would assist at-risk younger people under the benevolent leadership of the federal government as well as other public and private welfare agencies.

Even as Cohen was making his case to Califano for a broad, sweeping use of federal power on behalf of older Americans, other voices within the administration were registering their dissent over some of the more far-reaching reforms which Cohen and others had proposed for years. Internal reviews of Cohen’s list of proposals suggested that it would face strong headwinds from the Bureau of the Budget. The proposed increases in Social Security benefits were considered to be “relatively harmless,” but other initiatives, such as HEW’s proposal to require individual states to establish and maintain health and safety standards for rental housing occupied by recipients of Social Security’s Old Age Assistance program were rejected because of the “impossibility of enforcing such standards.” Major proposals such as expanding Medicare to include prescription drug coverage were ruled out as too expensive or too inefficient; placing older workers in manpower training programs received particular censure as “administratively inefficient,” possibly to the point of undermining the effectiveness of the federal government’s entire manpower training program system. Expanding the Older Americans Act, even in a manner more limited than the one prescribed by Cohen, was placed as a “lower priority” than improving Social Security, partly

129 Ibid.
130 Human Resources Programs Division, Review of 1969 Program Proposals for Older Americans submitted by HEW, October 11, 1968, in Box 39, Office Files of Joseph A. Califano, LBJL.
131 Ibid., 6-7.
because some of the suggested improvements to the Older Americans Act like constructing senior
citizen centers as part of the Model Cities program would likely bring additional, undesirable
criticism of the Model Cities program.132

In sum, the Johnson administration’s efforts ultimately reinforced both existing programs
like Social Security, while also opening up new avenues in how the federal government engaged
with the issue of elderly poverty. Earlier, the federal government’s efforts had been limited largely
to economic security for older people, with the fight over Social Security’s old age insurance versus
its old age assistance program occupying much of the time and energy of federal policymakers
between 1935 and 1965. After 1965, the federal government’s purview broadened considerably to
include health security programs like Medicare and Medicaid but also initiatives that had been
pioneered at the local and state level, such as legislation to ban discrimination on the basis of age in
the workplace and increased federal funding for affordable housing, community health centers, and
other antipoverty initiatives.

As a result of the Johnson administration’s efforts, the working relationships forged between
federal, state, and local welfare officials working on issues related to older Americans were greatly
strengthened, as were the linkages between government, academia, and private social welfare
organizations. The senior state, which had existed in an uneven and loosely organized form before
the 1960s would become more formally structured, as the federal government began to fund and
administer social services, rehabilitative programs, and other services that it had previously not
played a significant role in before. The senior state thereby came to embrace not just economic
security but also other types of security for older people which would have been unlikely just a
decade beforehand. After the end of the Johnson administration in January 1969, the Nixon
administration – not infrequently at the behest of congressional Democrats – would build upon and

132 Ibid.
reinforce the federal government’s commitments in this new arena, even as it began the process of rolling back other facets of the public welfare state and the War on Poverty’s community action program.

From Johnson to Nixon

While largely disdainful of the War on Poverty’s efforts to ameliorate poverty among African-Americans, the Nixon administration showed itself quite willing to accommodate and expand upon the Great Society’s efforts to reduce poverty among older, whiter Americans.133 Notably, Nixon had on the campaign trail in 1968 included older Americans as part of “an entire generation of forgotten Americans.”134 While such rhetoric represented an attempt on Nixon’s part to capture the ideological language that Franklin Roosevelt and other political liberals had once placed at the center of the New Deal’s promise of collective economic security, there was considerable evidence available to support Nixon’s claim. The enactment of Medicare in 1965 militated against claims that older Americans had been “forgotten” by the rest of American society, but the incomplete record of the Johnson administration on issues related to strengthening economic security for older Americans meant that there remained much work still to be done.135 As William Oriol, the Staff Director for the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, observed at a 1970 academic conference of gerontologists, “Americans have not yet fully decided what they think life

133 James Reston, “President Nixon, Poverty and Peace,” The New York Times, August 10, 1969. But see also G. Calvin MacKenzie and Robert Weisbrot’s The Liberal Hour, in which they observe that “Nixon was never the darling of conservatives, and though he made his initial splash in politics as a witch-hunting anticommunist, he was an internationalist in foreign policy and flexible on domestic issues” (MacKenzie and Weisbrot, The Liberal Hour, 352).
135 See Edwin L. Dale, Jr., “Number of Poor Down 2 Million,” The New York Times, August 20th, 1969, which reported that as of August 1969, 13% of the overall U.S. population was classified as poor, whereas in 1961, 22% were. At the same time, though, while programs like Medicare had helped decrease the number of elderly people living in poverty, the decision by its architects to allow for reimbursement of “reasonable and customary fees” by physicians had contributed to soaring medical costs far beyond what the Johnson administration had anticipated. See Richard D. Lyons, “Medicine: A ‘Gold Mine’ for Some Doctors,” The New York Times, July 6, 1969.
should be like for our aging and aged population” and asked “what do we really want for our aged and aging population, now and in the future?” Data from the newly-released 1970 Census lent statistical credence to Oriol’s observation about the improved but still fragile social and economic condition of many of the nation’s older citizens. The 1970 Census found that the proportion of the elderly had reached 9.9% of the overall U.S. population (up from 8.1% in 1950 and 9.2% in 1960) and that the number of elderly people numbered well over 20,000,000. At the same time, 1970 Census’s data also vividly displayed how the overall economic status of the elderly had improved between 1960 and 1970: by 1970, 33% of all older women were living alone and still maintaining economically independent households; in 1960, that proportion had stood at only 25% (the number of elderly men in a comparable position had only slightly improved from 13% in 1960 to 16% in 1970).

However, before the release of the Census’s report, there remained clear evidence that the problem of poverty and economic insecurity in old age remained far from solved. As the New York Times reported in June 1969, nearly half a million elderly residents of New York City still lived below the poverty line, and city welfare officials were increasingly concerned about the emergence of “senior power groups” that had already begun to wring increased benefits such as “half fare for the elderly on the city transit system” from New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Such rumblings were matched elsewhere in cities like Chicago, San Francisco, and

138 Ibid.
Boston, where local officials were becoming increasingly cognizant of “senior power” groups’ ability to persuade and petition for improvements to publicly provided services (including discounted access to public transportation).  

Unlike during the Great Depression, when the combination of unemployment and catastrophic failure of many banks (and consequently the loss of personal savings) had helped radicalize older Americans and propel them into organizations like the Townsend Movement, in the late 1960s, rising inflation and eroding personal purchasing power had led many retired people to become significantly more politically active and organized than they previously had been. With only limited access to the labor market, older people organized in order to exert pressure on elected officials to find ways to reduce their costs of living, whether via access to subsidized public transportation, recreation, nutrition, or tax relief. It was no coincidence that Margaret Kuhn’s Gray Panthers organization was founded in 1970, or that in New York State alone, some 500 cities, towns, and villages (including New York City) adopted laws reducing property tax laws for the elderly in the five year period from 1965 to 1970.

The grassroots efforts by older Americans to demand improved government services stood in stark contrast to the continuing confusion, duplication, and incoherence which seemed to mark federal programs and initiatives. The high hopes during the Great Society that the Older Americans Act might one day serve as a centerpiece for a truly comprehensive federal effort to assist older Americans increasingly were not fulfilled. As New York Senator Charles E. Goodell would admit

144 Ibid. For a full account of the Gray Panthers and Margaret Kuhn, see Roger Sanjek, Gray Panthers (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
during a 1970 meeting with some of his older constituents, all the expenditures authorized by Congress under the Older Americans Act in 1965 through 1970 would have been sufficient to finance the cost of the Vietnam War for less than two days.\textsuperscript{145}

Further evidence of the relative paltriness of federal efforts emerged during a series of hearings convened by Senator Harrison A. Williams of New Jersey in October 1969, which revealed that there was a “worsening retirement income crisis” in the United States because of a lack of “positive comprehensive action” on the part of lawmakers in Washington and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{146}

Testifying before the committee, Jack Ossofsky, the Project Director for Project FIND and the Deputy Director for the National Council on the Aging, observed that “almost two-thirds of the elderly couples” which Project FIND had identified “fell below the 1966 Social Security Administration poverty index level…what we have found indicates that many older poor people live below the poverty line and, secondly, that with increasing age there is a decrease in the income available to the people involved.”\textsuperscript{147} Other speakers at the same Senate hearings expressed their agreement with Ossofsky and Project FIND’s conclusions. Speaking on behalf of retired auto workers in Detroit, Olga Madar, a UAW executive board member, bluntly told the committee that “we cannot do a darn thing until we get a basic annual income for all people and let’s start with the group that has been hurt the most, as Project FIND has found out, and let’s start with the seniors.”\textsuperscript{148}

Echoing Madar, Beverly Diamond, a social welfare consultant in New York, identified the source of the problem as a lack of clearly defined policy at the national level:

The compelling fact is that we lack an over-all, consistent approach, a comprehensive plan, a national commitment to implement it. We have no established priorities to tackle the most critical needs, no realistic appropriations, no orderly steps to assure effectiveness and continuity. Instead we have spastic response by the [federal] Government to pressure, piece-meal approaches, too little, reaching too few. These sporadic responses to crisis, at best result in tokenism, at worst, in waste.\textsuperscript{149}

Despite the significant limits to federal assistance for the aging which the 1969 U.S. Senate hearings had exposed, public perception of the status of the elderly had markedly improved with the passage of Medicare and other legislation designed to buttress the economic security of older people. In a sign of just how much the rhetoric used to describe older Americans had changed since the Great Depression, the 1970 Census’s report on them described them in upbeat tones as “a vast untapped natural resource” and pondered “how we use this vast potential is one of the great questions facing American society in the remaining decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.”\textsuperscript{150}

The situation in 1969 was therefore a mixed one. The economic security of millions of older, middle-class Americans had undoubtedly improved thanks to the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid, and the increase in Social Security benefit levels put into place during the last two years of the Johnson administration had healed some of the wounds that inflationary spending had inflicted. At the same time, millions of poorer older Americans – especially those living in decaying inner cities and rural communities – remained at or below the official poverty line. Given both the growing proportion of older Americans relative to the size of the general population, it is hard to say whether the incoming Nixon administration’s efforts were primarily guided by political calculations


or by genuine concern for older Americans; in all likelihood a combination of the two factors was
responsible. As Joshua Freeman has written,

Nixon entered the White House without much of a mandate, having
been elected with a minority of the popular vote after a campaign in
which he largely mouthed generalities…Nixon hoped to win over
some traditionally Democratic constituencies to ensure his reelection
and rebuild the Republicans as a national majority party. To woo
them, he supported the core New Deal economic and social programs
from which they benefitted, even as he took conservative positions on
other issues.¹⁵¹

Nixon’s efforts to woo older Americans by showering attention and money on them were
readily apparent in his repeated messages to Congress demanding more legislative action on their
behalf.¹⁵² While Nixon was not known for his deep interest in domestic policy – like his predecessor
John F. Kennedy, he was primarily concerned with foreign policy – his domestic policy legacy for
older Americans was quite enviable in light of developments in later years.¹⁵³ As Joshua Freeman
has pointed out,

During Nixon’s first term, Social Security old-age benefits went up 52
percent, with future benefits indexed to the cost of living, a huge
structural change. The federal government also took over from the
states supplementary, needs-based income guarantees for the elderly,
blind, and disabled. Elderly Americans, who once made up a major
component of the poor, all but ceased living in poverty.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Freeman, American Empire, 267.
¹⁵² See for example Nixon’s lengthy Special Message to Congress in March 1972 at Richard Nixon: “Special Message
to the Congress on Older Americans,” March 23, 1972. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American
half years later, Nixon issued no fewer than six messages, proclamations, or executive orders directly targeted at older
¹⁵³ As the journalist and Nixon biographer Elizabeth Drew has observed (quoting top Nixon aide John Ehrlichman):
“The only domestic issues that Nixon was truly interested in…were those he believed were ‘potent political
medicine’…therefore, Nixon took personal charge of all such politically loaded issues as abortion, race, aid to parochial
schools, labor legislation, drugs, crime, welfare, and taxes.” (John Ehrlichman, Witness to Power: The Nixon Years,
2007), 48-50. As G. Calvin MacKenzie and Robert Weisbrot have observed, “to those closest to Nixon, his lack of
interest in domestic policy was legendary…Nixon seemed to believe not that the domestic programs he inherited could
or should be eliminated, but that they needed to be better managed.” (MacKenzie and Weisbrot, The Liberal Hour, 346-
347).
¹⁵⁴ Freeman, American Empire, 267-268.
Despite the President’s rhetoric during the 1968 campaign criticizing the Great Society for excessive spending and misplaced priorities, the Nixon administration would retain and bolster the strong working relationship that the Johnson administration had helped to build with the voluntary sector and individual state welfare agencies in the realm of aging policy.155

**The Nixon Administration and Older Americans**

Nixon’s embrace of this issue owed much to the personnel whom he had installed to administer and supervise federal policies for older people. Primarily, he turned to several surviving veterans of the Eisenhower administration to organize and execute a domestic policy agenda designed to appeal to the hearts and votes of older Americans, and to do so in a way that would quell concerns about overt partisanship on the part of the administration.156 To this end, he invited Bertha Adkins, a former HEW Under-Secretary, and Arthur Flemming, a former HEW Secretary, to take up posts within the administration, as well as other former members of the Eisenhower administration.157 This coterie of moderate, centrist Republicans thereafter held the vital levers of power, with Nixon largely content to defer to them. Adkins, in particular, proved to be a diligent and valuable foot soldier. In 1969, Nixon appointed her to a newly-created Presidential Task Force on the Aging, and charged the Task Force with the overall responsibility of “determin[ing] how best to achieve for the elderly maximum security, dignity, and independence” by “apprais[ing] the

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155 See Senate Special Committee on Aging, *The Nation’s Stake in the Employment of Middle-Aged and Older Persons: A Working Paper*, Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, 92nd Cong., 1st Sess., July 1971, v-vi., (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971). In particular, the Nixon administration continued the close relationship that the Johnson administration had forged with the National Council of Senior Citizens to operate Senior Community Service programs, and had also largely kept in place other Johnson administration initiatives for the elderly poor like the Foster Grandparent Program.


effectiveness of present programs affecting the aging” and finally “suggest[ing] how such programs might be improved.”

Nixon’s creation of a new Task Force on Aging within his administration seemed peculiar given the fact that the Johnson administration had sponsored a similar task force only a few years prior, and the recommendations and findings of those task forces had only been partially implemented. It became apparent over time that while Nixon was largely content to sign off on continued improvements to the programs for the elderly which the Johnson administration had initiated, he also desired to put his own stamp on them, and thereby earn some measure of credit from older voters. The reason for the new task force came therefore less from deep intellectual engagement than from the need not to be caught flatfooted by either congressional Democrats or watchful national old age advocacy groups, both of whom closely monitored the administration’s actions. Democrats in Congress, in particular, were especially eager to take a leading role in determining the course of federal policy on this subject, just as they had ten years prior in prodding the Eisenhower administration to take action on the question of health insurance for the elderly. In March 1969, the U.S. Senate’s Special Committee on Aging had released a lengthy report that had

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159 Evidence of Nixon’s willingness to largely ratify the legislative course set by the Johnson administration was evident from the first year of his administration, when he signed off on additional legislative amendments to the Older Americans Act in September 1969. See Richard Nixon: “Remarks on Signing the Older Americans Act Amendments of 1969,” September 17, 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2235 (accessed December 21, 2016). The 1969 amendments continued the previous appropriations for the Older Americans Act and also authorized a “National Older Americans Volunteer Program,” a reworked version of the senior volunteer corps proposal which had been previously debated and largely rejected by the Johnson administration which aimed to recruit “individuals aged 60 or over to provide services needed in their communities” albeit without compensation. The 1969 amendments also removed the popular Foster Grandparents program from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to the Administration on Aging (AoA), a move which reflected the new administration’s disregard for the OEO. See Administration on Aging, Older Americans Act of 1965, As Amended: Text and History, Social and Rehabilitative Service, Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, pg. 28 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, November 1970).
thoroughly lambasted the inadequacy of the federal government’s efforts for older Americans, and which proposed a wide range of initiatives to more thoroughly address the issue.  

In response, the Nixon-appointed Task Force conceded that “the [federal] government should act with and on behalf of the elderly much more vigorously than it currently does,” but instead of endorsing the programs desired by Senate Democrats, the Task Force offered twenty-four recommendations in a broad range of areas, starting with the urgent need to reorganize and coordinate the federal government’s activities, and dutifully presented its report to President Nixon in February 1970. The Task Force’s Report clearly echoed the President’s campaign rhetoric and labeled elderly Americans as “the silent majority” that risked being overlooked in the rising student and youth discontent which had arisen over the Vietnam War, and emphasized the need for the administration to improve its solicitation of the needs of older Americans.

In addition to the Task Force’s efforts, the administration began undertaking the necessary planning for a second White House Conference on Aging, which it scheduled to be held in 1971, ten years after the first one that had convened in the last days of the Eisenhower administration. Like its 1961 predecessor, the 1971 White House Conference on Aging brought together an enormous cross-section of experts, elected officials, and private citizens to prepare and propose policy recommendations for the administration. Administration officials like HEW Secretary Arthur Flemming hoped and believed that the conference would allow the federal government to fundamentally reorganize and rationalize its increasingly fragmented and incoherent approach to

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160 The Senate’s Special Committee on Aging would continue throughout the Nixon administration to produce numerous reports which were critical – almost to a fault – of the administration’s efforts to deal with elderly poverty. See “Senate Study Links Retirement Age to Poverty,” The New York Times, August 26, 1969.
161 Ibid., 2.
162 Ibid., 13.
dealing with the problems of older Americans. As a confidential list of talking point questions prepared by the Administration on Aging for use in conjunction with congressional hearings stated,

We hope [that] the White House Conference will give us recommendations or proposals from which we can formulate a broad, comprehensive, systematic policy or set of policies with respect to the older population...What we mean by Toward a National Policy on Aging, then, is the identification of the elements from which we may develop comprehensive, explicit policies as to how American society should adapt itself to the presence of larger and larger numbers of retired people living into advanced years.164

Yet for all the publicity the administration tried to generate in the press, the conference ultimately seemed to be much ado about nothing, despite high hopes that it might produce some important breakthrough, much as the 1961 conference had helped galvanize support for Medicare.165 Specifically, the 1971 conference organizers hoped that it would allow the federal government to “pinpoint more realistically and comprehensively the actions needed to solve these problems [of the aged] and to move toward the development of an achievable national policy on aging,” a high-minded goal which had eluded the federal government for nearly forty years.166

President Nixon, in his remarks to the assembled conference delegates, made publicly known his wish that the conference endorse H.R. 1, the administration’s controversial bill designed

164 Folder tab “Possible Q & A on Issues on Aging” in Administration on Aging – Briefing Book (2) folder, Box 30, Papers of Arthur S. Flemming, DDEL.
to transform the nation’s welfare system by moving towards a universal basic income and away from the patchwork system of categorical federal aid programs which had accumulated since the New Deal.\textsuperscript{167} H.R. 1 was not originally intended to primarily benefit older Americans, but it did offer important reforms like making Social Security benefits inflation-proof and raising the amount of annual income that Social Security recipients were permitted to earn without risking a commensurate reduction in their existing benefit payments.

In the end, though, the 1971 White House Conference failed to achieve the lofty goals of its organizers. While it was followed by some increased funding to the Administration on Aging as well as other Executive Branch agencies with programs designed to help the elderly (such as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Housing and Urban Development), it was not clear if this increase was a result of the conference or if the administration was simply planning on making such increases anyway as the 1972 presidential election year approached.

Even if the conference did not produce much in the way of tangible results, it did reinforce the existing federal and state relationship in combatting the economic insecurity faced by many older Americans. As Ray Swartz, a Nixon administration official who was involved in the conference’s planning later recalled, the 1972 conference had once more reaffirmed the primacy of state and local governments in actually dealing with the issue of old age poverty.\textsuperscript{168} The Nixon administration had placed great emphasis on the need to devolve power from a supposedly out-of-control federal government back to the states, and the conference turned out to be an excellent forum to showcase this objective.

Swartz further recalled that “the government views the conference process as the community being the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of conference activity…therefore, the

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
The thrust of programs now being planned and getting under way, whether they are out of the Administration on Aging … or some other federal program, is at the community level.” While some administration officials (in particular, Arthur Flemming and Bertha Adkins) had hoped that the conference would lead to a “real philosophy of aging” or a “real national policy [on aging],” the conference ended up reinforcing state and local level plans and policies as the best way to address the tremendously varied needs of older Americans – in essence, that there could not be a “one size fits all” national solution to the economic, social, and psychological needs of the elderly population.

To some extent, this failure to find a new or more coherent way to shape old age policy in the United States represented a crucial missed opportunity to break free from the cage of categorical assistance to which old age policy at the federal level was increasingly relegated. Rather than being linked to broader attempts to reinsert it as part of a broader program to provide economic security to the entire American family, the 1971 White House conference reinforced existing, fragmented efforts that frequently duplicated each other. As John B. Martin, then serving as the head of the Administration on Aging observed, old age policy had been limited to a kind of “crash survival program” focused largely on immediate concerns. Instead, Martin believed that what was really needed was “clear, specific, long- and short-range goals and a program for reaching these goals,” a set of objectives that the conference had spectacularly failed to produce.

The Failure of FAP and the Politics of Old-Age Economic Security

The Nixon administration’s growing focus on older Americans during this time period came in the wake of its failure to secure the enactment of its proposed Family Assistance Program (FAP)

169 Ibid., 39.
171 Ibid., 31.
in 1969. As proposed, FAP was a broad, sweeping reform of the unwieldy accumulation of federal social welfare programs that the Nixon administration had inherited from its collective predecessors. Briefly summarized, FAP promised to remake such programs in a way that hewed much closer to the guaranteed annual income model which liberal economists like Leon Keyserling had advocated during the Great Society’s heyday, and in order to do so, it proposed to scrapping “categorical” aid programs and implement a “universal income supplement program financed and administered by the Federal government, making payments based on income needs to all members of the population.” Effectively, “needs-based” assistance programs like the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) would no longer be subject to means testing, and would be merged with other assistance programs like Social Security’s Old Age Assistance program, whose levels of assistance had by the 1970s become highly variable due to the ability of states to determine how much they wished to contribute to such payments. Respecting the popularity of Social Security’s old-age social insurance system, the Nixon administration pledged to leave it untouched by the proposed FAP legislation.

Despite President Nixon’s rhetoric on the subject of welfare programs, his administration unexpectedly embraced these proposed reforms of the nation’s income maintenance programs. Nixon’s unconventional embrace of FAP came as a surprise to his political allies and opponents, most of whom greeted the proposal with tepid support at best. However, while the Nixon administration explored the problems facing elderly people, it did so in part because of governmental competition from the U.S. Senate’s Special Committee on the Problems of the Aging.

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174 Ibid.
175 See MacKenzie and Weisbrot, The Liberal Hour, 367-368.
Founded in the late 1950s by Senator Patrick McNamara, the committee had been responsible for dramatically focusing the nation’s attention on the rising medical costs and increased poverty among older people in the years immediately before the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965. The Committee had also emerged as a crucial meeting point between senators and emissaries from local and state governments, as well as voluntary organizations like the AARP, and its hearings had frequently helped to identify and propose legislation to address the issues faced by older Americans. By the late 1960s, the committee remained firmly in the hands of congressional Democrats, many of whom were openly suspicious of the Nixon administration’s motives for embracing domestic policy initiatives like old age assistance that had hitherto been the heart and hearth of the Democratic Party.

In order to ensure that the Nixon administration would not be able to steal its thunder, the committee began to produce numerous reports documenting the federal government’s shortcomings in the area of old-age policy, and frequently used these reports to publicly castigate the Nixon administration’s efforts, much as it had during the 1960s to highlight the meager efforts of Sargent Shriver’s Office of Economic Opportunity to address elderly poverty. Senator Russell Long (D-LA), in particular, emerged as one of the Nixon administration’s harshest critics, and repeatedly railed against the administration’s proposed guaranteed annual income program throughout 1971. Long, now the powerful chairman of the Senate’s Finance Committee, condemned the proposals as

leading to “a permanent welfare subculture,” and vowed to do everything he could to prevent its enactment.\textsuperscript{180}

Long proved to be good to his word. In November 1971, he publicly declared that “elderly Americans could already be enjoying increased Social Security benefits if it were not for the ‘ill-advised welfare expansion proposed by the President.'”\textsuperscript{181} Long’s colleagues on the Senate Finance Committee followed his lead. Senator Wallace Bennett (R-UT) addressed the conference as well, and pointedly noted in his statement that “Senator Long and I – indeed, the full [Senate Finance] committee – share a common desire to establish reasonable minimum income levels for the aged, blind, and disabled under welfare and for those dependent upon Social Security.”\textsuperscript{182} In other words, both Long and Bennett had re-emphasized their support for public assistance, but only along categorical lines. Their endorsement of aid to the elderly and other groups therefore rejected the guaranteed, universal approach which FAP had proposed.

At first, the Nixon administration refused to back down. In March 1972, Nixon sent a lengthy message to Congress asking for significantly improved funding for federal programs to help the elderly, and reaffirmed his support for the controversial welfare reforms which both Senators Long and Bennett had rejected the previous fall.\textsuperscript{183} In his message, the President sent a lengthy list of recommendations, many of which derived from either the administration’s Task Force on older Americans or the 1971 White House Conference on Aging. Notably, Nixon identified numerous legislative initiatives included in his message as deserving of the “highest priority on this year’s Congressional agenda” because “it is the elderly who have the best reason to be impatient” rather than what he derided as “the impatience of youth,” a reference perhaps to the student anti-war

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
movement. Nixon urged the Congress to “stop treating older Americans as a burden and to start treating them as a resource,” and argued instead for the need to “fight the many forces which can cause older persons to feel dependent or isolated” and to “provide…continuing opportunities for them to be self-reliant and involved.”

Perhaps more surprisingly, Nixon urged Congress to significantly increase Social Security benefits, make the program inflation proof, and to “establish a floor under the income of older Americans for the first time.” In fact, Nixon identified the protection of the “income position of older Americans” as his highest priority, and alongside his proposed expansion of Social Security, he embraced even further “the role played by private pension plans,” which he argued should receive “tax deductions to encourage their expansion, requiring the vesting of pensions, and protecting the investments which have been made in these funds.” Had this measure been submitted by the Johnson administration instead, scarcely a word of it would have needed to be changed.


185 Ibid., 1.

186 Ibid., 2.

187 Ibid., 2. Specifically, Nixon proposed to “replace the present Old Age Assistance Program with a single, federally-financed program which would provide a monthly income of $150 (1972 dollars) for an individual and $200 (1972 dollars) for a couple when fully effective.” His proposed replacement to OAA would “assist 4.5 million elderly persons instead of the 2.1 million currently reached” and would consider “eligibility for assistance would be determined on the basis of need without regard to the income or assets of relatives.” (Ibid., 5).

188 If anything, the Nixon administration embraced the Older Americans Act and the Administration on Aging with a wholeheartedness that had eluded both during the Johnson administration. In his message to Congress, Nixon specifically requested over a quarter of a billion dollars (1972 dollars) to fully fund the Older Americans Act’s programs, and affirmed its commitment to “renew and strengthen the Older Americans Act, which so many older persons rightly regard as landmark legislation in the field of aging – extending it for an indefinite period rather than for a specified period of years.” (Ibid., 3).
The striking similarity of the approach taken by the Johnson and then Nixon administrations on the issue of old age economic security suggested just how deeply the bipartisan consensus on the parameters of the senior state had become, despite periodic attempts by administrations on both sides of the aisle to reform its chaotic development and lack of coordination. Increasingly, it seemed as though a tacit acceptance of the fragmented character of the senior state had emerged as the defining consensus of the federal government’s efforts to address old age poverty, with a decided emphasis on sending the issue back to the states and local communities if at all possible.

In the end, Nixon got only part of what he had originally asked for in his message to Congress. In July 1972, the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly voted to expand and extend the 1965 Older Americans Act, and flooded the long-beleaguered law with $1.5 billion in appropriations, a sum that easily dwarfed anything it had previously received, even during the heyday of the Great Society.\textsuperscript{189} The Senate followed suit in October 1972, voting unanimously to approve the House’s dramatic monetary improvements to the Older Americans Act, and Nixon signed the final legislation in late October 1972, right before Election Day.\textsuperscript{190}

Nevertheless, the legislation Nixon signed bore little relation to the far-reaching reforms originally proposed under the aegis of the Family Assistance Plan (FAP).\textsuperscript{191} In place of FAP, Nixon signed an omnibus piece of legislation that reinforced Social Security and Medicare and also created a new program called Supplemental Security Income (SSI).\textsuperscript{192} While Nixon expressed his “great pleasure” in signing the significantly modified H.R. 1 bill that the Senate had sent back to him, in

\textsuperscript{189} “$1.5 Billion in Aid to Elderly Approved by House, 351 to 3,” \textit{The New York Times}, July 18, 1972.
truth, the new legislation consisted mostly of halfway measures that had been debated for years. It did create a basic income program, but that program was strictly limited to selected categories of recipients. Furthermore, while SSI was designed to replace and equalize state-level programs of aid to the aged, blind, and disabled, it was paid for out of general tax revenues rather than Social Security’s trust funds, a violation of the social insurance model that the original architects of Social Security had so strenuously favored as a way to win lasting popular support and acceptance.

In its own strange way, though, the SSI program fulfilled long-standing calls for expanded action by the federal government to assist older Americans. Extending back to the first days of the Nixon administration – and further still, into the heyday of the Great Society – an emergent consensus had held that both the voluntary and governmental sectors were necessary to alleviate the problems of older Americans, but that the federal government was not pulling its weight.

In the aftermath of the highly politicized and racially charged controversy surrounding the War on Poverty’s focus on minority youth unemployment in America’s cities, the Nixon administration recognized that the political ground had shifted more strongly in favor of using the federal government’s resources to benefit older, white citizens rather than younger, black ones.

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193 Ibid.
195 In its April 1970 report “Toward A Brighter Future for the Elderly,” the President’s Task Force on the Aging had argued that “government should act with and on behalf of the elderly much more vigorously than it currently does,” and had recommended that “the President revise the proposed Family Assistance Act so that all older persons are eligible for sufficient assistance to bring their total incomes up to the amount defined by the Federal Government as the ‘poverty line’ for the elderly. We further recommend that the Federal Government bear 100% of the cost of such assistance.” See The Report of the President’s Task Force on the Aging, Toward a Brighter Future for the Elderly April 1970, 5 (Washington, D.C.: U.S Government Printing Office, 1970).
Nixon had alluded to this shift in his opening remarks to the 1971 White House Conference on Aging, when he had noted that

[i]n recent years all of us know a gulf has been opening between older Americans and the rest of our people. This gulf is the product of a great social revolution which has weakened the traditional bonds of family, neighborhood, and community. For millions of older Americans, the result has been a growing sense of isolation and insecurity. We have to change that.197

While promoting intergenerational connection was not the highest domestic priority for the Nixon administration, Nixon and conservative southern Democrats like Russell Long could find common ground on the subject of using the federal government’s resources to reduce poverty among older Americans. Despite his emergence as a stalwart critic of the nation’s public welfare system, Long, like many other southerners on Capitol Hill, had long favored improvements to Social Security’s old age assistance program because it effectively subsidized the meager monthly payments made by many poorer southern and western states to older people using the federal government’s general tax revenues.198 As the powerful chairman of the Senate’s Finance Committee, Long could not be easily disregarded by the Nixon administration, which he had frequently lambasted as being too willing to support the expansion of welfare for comparatively unworthy recipients.

By contrast, expanding Social Security’s old age assistance program once more presented the administration with a proposal that was likely to win the support of Senator Long and his like-minded colleagues in Congress. Nixon’s own Task Force on the Aging had endorsed the principle that “restructuring and refinancing Old Age Assistance is imperative” and had only endorsed “the Family Assistance Act as it applies to the elderly,” a careful qualifier that revealed how the issue of elderly poverty remained divorced and separate from broader discussions of poverty and welfare in the United States.\(^{199}\)

In further defiance of the Nixon administration, the Senate authorized additional spending under the Older Americans Act in February 1973, thus daring Nixon to again veto a piece of legislation that was both badly needed and sure to provoke significant popular discontent against the administration should the President refuse to sign it into law. When Nixon had previously vetoed the additional funds for the Older Americans Act, he had done so on the grounds that “the range of narrow, categorical service programs” like the Older Americans Act “would seriously interfere with our efforts to develop coordinated services for older persons.”\(^{200}\) Ultimately, the administration would successfully pare back Congress’s proposed February 1973 bill to $551.6 million in expenditures for programs under the Older Americans Act, rather than the $2 billion which Congress had originally sought, before Nixon signed the bill into law.\(^{201}\)

**Gray Panthers and Senior Power**

Despite the administration’s legislative victory over Congress, the nascent “senior power” movement that had had its first, unorganized stirrings in major cities like New York and Philadelphia were now being harnessed by established old-age advocacy groups to advance a more

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ambitious agenda. In June 1973, approximately 3,000 elderly citizens, “many wearing oversized ‘Senior Power’ buttons” gathered on the steps of the Capitol building to “petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”\(^{202}\) Nelson Cruikshank, now the president of the National Council of Senior Citizens, had helped to organize the dramatic display of disgruntled senior citizens, who, like a previous generation of older activists during the fight over Medicare in the early 1960s, proceeded to roam the halls of Congress to cajole anyone who happened to be in their offices that day. Cruikshank had organized the rally because he believed that the Nixon administration had largely disregarded and ignored the findings of the White House Conference on Aging in 1971. In his words, “that conference was billed as the basis for developing programs for the seventies for older Americans…but what do we see in fact – serious budget cutbacks, increases in Medicare costs and a housing moratorium.”\(^{203}\)

While Cruikshank was likely speaking out in part due to partisan reasons – he had long been affiliated with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, and had been the head of the AFL-CIO’s Social Security Department – the presence of thousands of elderly protestors suggested that his criticisms of the Nixon administration carried a fair amount of popular heft. Elderly poverty clearly remained a persistent problem in the United States, especially in cities like New York, where newspaper stories of impoverished elderly people stealing food from supermarkets or trapped in decaying tenement buildings abounded.\(^{204}\) Despite the enactment of SSI as part of the Social Security system and increases in Social Security social insurance benefit levels, elderly poverty rates remained frustratingly stable, at least at first. Slowly, though, old age assistance caseloads began to drop as fewer elderly people filed for public assistance.\(^{205}\)

\(^{203}\) Ibid.
In New York, city officials were particularly keen to move elderly residents off public assistance. Mayor John Lindsay’s administration contracted with the private Community Council of New York to help find and register elderly people who were otherwise eligible for SSI but had not yet enrolled in the program. As Lindsay stated, “we know that many elderly have lived in desperate poverty rather than apply for old age assistance…the stigma of applying for welfare should be greatly reduced by the transfer of income assistance to the Social Security Administration.”

Lindsay’s words neatly encapsulated how “Social Security” had become a semantically and ideologically separate realm of public assistance from “welfare” over the course of the previous thirty years, and the placement of SSI (which was not radically different from the long-established Old Age Assistance title of Social Security) under the rubric of Social Security probably represented an attempt to overcome the fear of many older Americans that they would be grouped together with socially stigmatized “welfare” recipients. The improvements to Social Security benefit levels and the creation of SSI therefore represented an attempt to simultaneously move older people off of local and state public assistance rolls by offering them significant improvements to Social Security and the provisions of SSI, and to do so in a way that would encourage their cooperation rather than resistance.

In the end, despite the 1970 Census’s description of older people as “untapped natural resource,” the policy prospects at the federal level were considerably less promising than they had been only fifteen years beforehand. In her testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Aging in July 1974, influential Michigan Rep. Martha W. Griffiths skeptically noted that

[i]n our efforts to help the aged, we often have acted more on the urge to do good than on the basis of hard facts. Before we act, we should know the characteristics of who will benefit, by how much they will


benefit, who will pay, and how much it will cost. Otherwise, we may again – as we have in the past – spend many millions, yet see that only a few dollars trickle down to the persons we intend to aid.208

While Griffiths had been a supporter of expanded Social Security benefits as well as Great Society initiatives to improve the lives of older Americans, she concluded her testimony by urging the assembled senators to devote more attention to the needs of “non-aged persons.”209 Despite Griffiths’ suggestion that Congress devote more time to welfare reform and health care, the generous increases in Social Security which Nixon had signed into law only a few years previously had only arrested but not completely halted the powerful forces of inflation that had eroded the purchasing power of millions of older Americans. As an Administration on Aging staff background paper noted in the fall of 1974, “over 3.5 million persons 65 and over – over 17% of the total population 65 and over – have incomes below the poverty level.”210

While the Nixon administration had achieved notable successes in expanding Social Security and creating SSI, its inability to persuade Congress to adopt the FAP would come back to haunt future efforts to impose rational order upon the nation’s complicated and fragmented public social welfare system. By the time Richard Nixon left office in 1974, it was becoming clear that rising inflation and faltering economic growth would likely challenge future efforts to improve public social welfare programs, including Social Security, Medicare, and the broad suite of lesser programs created to assist older people.211 Despite the Nixon administration’s efforts, old age economic insecurity continued to be a pressing issue in communities throughout the country. As one New

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209 Ibid.
York City welfare official noted in March 1974, “fifty or sixty or even a hundred dollars a month isn’t enough for [old] people to live on…what they need is a guaranteed income, special housing and elimination of the rip offs of old people like the high prices of drugs.”


The continuing struggles of many older people received further amplification in 1975, when the publisher Harper & Row released *Why Survive? Being Old In America*, a jeremiad authored by Dr. Robert Neil Butler, a renowned gerontologist. Clocking in at nearly 500 pages in length, *Why Survive?* offered its readers a stinging critique of the federal government’s efforts to provide true economic security for older Americans. In language reminiscent of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, Butler pointedly argued that “old age in America is often a tragedy…the truth is that we cannot promise a decent existence for those elderly now alive.” While conceding that Social Security and Medicare had helped to alleviate elderly poverty, Butler forcefully condemned the federal government for not doing enough; in his words, the task of alleviating elderly poverty “has not been finished and the efforts do not match the needs.”

Despite its dense, forbidding prose, *Why Survive?* received wide acclaim the year it was published, and won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1975. While the book likely benefitted from increasingly skeptical post-Watergate attitudes towards public institutions like the federal government, its criticisms could not be so easily dismissed, given Butler’s record as the first director of the National Institute of Aging. *Why Survive?* captured public attention and focused it on the problem of poverty in old age, but offered little in the way of solutions, other than to decry past efforts as inadequate. While the numerous criticisms made by Butler in *Why Survive?* were not

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212 Ibid.

213 Robert N. Butler, *Why Survive? Being Old in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), xi. Butler, like Harrington before him, argued that “We are less likely to see the old as poor because they are literally less visible” (Ibid., 22).

214 Ibid., 21. Butler conceded that “Social Security keeps more than twelve million persons of all age out of poverty as officially defined…in absolute numbers, for more than two million of the twenty million aged, Social Security is the only source of income. Nonetheless, Social Security has not eliminated poverty in old age” (Ibid., 34).
new, the mere fact that they had persisted for forty years after the enactment of Social Security and ten years after the enactment of Medicare suggested just how incomplete and partial the foundations of the senior state remained, despite the efforts of two generations of dedicated efforts among social reformers, union leaders, and public welfare officials to eliminate economic insecurity in old age.

A weakening national economy during the mid-1970s and higher than expected costs of Medicare helped to erode the assumptions of economic growth that had guided the modest expansion of federal social welfare programs during the postwar era. Instead of searching for ways to expand existing programs or to enact new ones, federal officials began to look at ways to pare back existing programs. This shift began not with Ronald Reagan, but with the Carter administration during the late 1970s. Throughout his administration, Jimmy Carter took pains to rhetorically and programmatically distance himself from the legacy of the New Deal.215 As William Leuchtenburg has observed:

Jimmy Carter had won office by capitalizing on distrust of the government leviathan that had emerged in the Roosevelt era, and as chief executive he self-consciously acted out the role of a man with different perception of power from FDR’s.216

Carter’s rejection of the New Deal was not simply a matter of how he perceived power; rather, his spurning of the Democratic Party’s twentieth-century patron saint was far more substantive. In his 1978 State of the Union address to the Congress, Carter pointedly observed that

[government cannot solve our problems, it can't set our goals, it cannot define our vision. Government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy. And government cannot mandate

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215 See, for example, William Leuchtenburg’s masterful discussion of Carter’s efforts to present his administration as a definitive break from the New Deal in his In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Barack Obama (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 186-192.
216 Leuchtenburg, In the Shadow of FDR, 192-193.
goodness. Only a true partnership between government and the people can ever hope to reach these goals.\textsuperscript{217}

Carter’s administration bore out his belief that government spending had become excessive. Tellingly, after his presidency Carter recalled that “my main political problem was with the so-called liberal wing of the Democratic Party. I went into office demanding deregulation of the private enterprise system, and balancing budgets and…cutting back on some of the excessive social programs that I thought were overly costly. This was my biggest political problem when I was in office.”\textsuperscript{218}

Carter’s recollection matched up with the experience of Joseph Califano in the Carter administration. Califano, who had served as Lyndon Johnson’s top domestic policy aide, later served as Carter’s Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare until he was summarily dismissed by Carter in 1979. Before his dismissal, Califano had been one of the key architects of the Carter administration’s policies for older Americans. In July 1978, Califano testified on the subject of “U.S. Policy for the Aging” before the Senate Special Committee on Aging. In his remarks, Califano painted a dire picture for the assembled senators by highlighting four distinct factors, which he argued could eventually prove to be problematic: longer life expectancies, a growing population of older Americans (a “senior boom”), earlier retirement, and a decrease in the number of active workers.\textsuperscript{219}

When these four factors were combined, Califano noted that they had “a significant impact on the federal budget…[p]rograms for the elderly are claiming an increasing share of our


\textsuperscript{218} Leuchtenburg, \textit{In the Shadow of FDR}, 194.

resources." In practical terms, the federal government was spending $112 billion (1978 dollars) or “5 per cent of the gross national product and 24 per cent of the federal budget for fiscal year 1978,” an amount that Califano emphasized would only continue to grow in the future. Though Califano stated that “these figures are subject to the hazards that afflict all estimates…I cite them not to alarm, simply to inform,” the dire fiscal picture painted by Califano earlier in his testimony belied this qualifying statement. In light of this “fiscal pressure,” Califano urged his listeners to face the facts and “make sure it has the capacity to meet future obligations.”

While Califano’s message was not a new one – fiscal conservatives had long decried Social Security, Medicare, and other senior state programs as being far too expensive and far too ineffective at achieving the goal of providing true economic security in old age – the messenger was what made it remarkable. Califano had in many respects been Lyndon Johnson’s right hand man during the Great Society, and the Johnson administration had shown only limited concern about fiscal pressures; if anything, it had happily disregarded them for a time in order to try and simultaneously fund the Great Society’s programs and a generous personal income tax reduction at home as well as the conflict in Vietnam.

That a message stressing the dangers of domestic programs should come from a faithful soldier of the Great Society was noteworthy, for it signaled the evolving consensus within the Democratic Party. As Califano would later concede in an interview ahead of his participation at a 1985 conference marking the twentieth anniversary of the Great Society, the fatal flaw of the Great Society was that “the Government simply got into too many nooks and crannies in American

221 Ibid.
222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
life.” 224 The Carter administration had come into power without the support of much of the traditional New Deal coalition, and Carter himself had remained disdainful of the New Deal’s ideological heritage of embracing government as a shield for guaranteeing the economic security of average Americans. Because he was a Carter administration official, Califano’s words provided a bipartisan imprimatur to criticism of programs like Social Security and Medicare. Such criticism had once been largely confined to the political right. Now, a bona fide liberal Democrat had latched onto formerly partisan critiques of the New Deal and the Great Society’s institutional heritage. In doing so, Califano and the Carter administration would pave the way for more strident attacks on these programs in future years.

This was surely not Califano’s intention; as a faithful public servant and loyal Democrat, he probably hoped that attempts to reform the federal government’s domestic programs could be made that would prevent a painful fiscal reckoning in the future if government spending were not curtailed. For example, in his 1978 remarks before the Senate, Califano had underlined the unexpectedly high costs of Medicare and Medicaid, which had not been foreseen in 1965 when those programs were originally enacted. He did not wish to see these programs repealed; rather, in his testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging, he stated that “we must build a more rational, comprehensive, efficient and human system for delivering health services.” 225

In light of these growing fiscal pressures, as well as the unlikelihood that the Carter administration would either propose the creation of expensive new programs or request increased funding for existing ones to help older Americans, Califano seemed to suggest that American families would, by and large, be expected to pick up the slack. 226 As he observed in his testimony,

226 Ibid. 1580-1581.
Many people contend that the American family is disintegrating or that it no longer cares for its elderly members. The reality is, I believe the opposite…Too often in the past we have designed our programs for the elderly with the individual in mind but not the family unit. We have failed to tap the strength of the family in caring for the elderly. We need to establish programs that help families care for their aged members.227

While Califano concluded by stating that “a healthy and growing economy” was necessary “to accommodate generously the needs of rising numbers of older citizens,” his argument that American families needed to take a more active role in providing care and support to their oldest members represented a repudiation of much of the thinking which had guided the New Deal’s architects and their intellectual heirs in both political parties. For decades, Social Security and other programs had existed and been supported because of their role in preventing exactly what Califano was proposing – i.e., allowing some of the most vulnerable members of the American family from falling into penury, and truly becoming a financial burden on their families and their communities, as had been the case during the years of the urban poorhouse and the county poor farm. In an age of stagflation and economic crisis, the Carter administration had chosen to jettison the New Deal’s ideological commitment to broad collective economic security through the apparatus of the federal government.

Nor was Califano the only veteran of the Johnson administration to criticize the existing arrangement of federal spending on programs for the elderly. Joining him was Robert H. Binstock, an academic expert from Brandeis University who had served as the executive director of the Johnson administration’s Task Force on Older Americans. Writing in the pages of the prominent

227 Ibid. 1581.
weekly magazine *National Journal*, Binstock asserted that the federal government’s considerable spending on programs for older Americans had failed to accomplish much:

The remarkably large proportion of federal spending that is devoted to programs for the elderly is becoming well known…What has not been emphasized sufficiently, however, is the extent to which the current expenditures of $112 billion on programs for the aging represents an indictment of the American style of domestic public policy. One might expect that if the federal government allocates one-quarter of its budget to a particular target population of 23 million citizens, then that population’s economic, health, and social problems would be substantially alleviated. Yet, that is not the case.228

As Binstock further observed, “our current agenda of public programs toward the aging is truly incredible for it includes virtually every aspect of human existence,” with the federal government alone responsible for 134 programs designated for older people.229 The Older Americans Act, while still slender in size compared to Social Security and Medicare, accounted for $500 million in federal spending by 1978, and had fostered the creation of a “national network on aging anchored by 600 area agencies on aging.”230 The national network on aging also included 1,000 senior centers, 9,000 nutrition programs for elderly people, “as well as research and education programs,” most of which, Binstock concluded, “would not exist or would be devoting their attention and efforts to matters other than aging.”231

Despite his praise of the federal government’s efforts to bolster the social and economic security of older Americans, Binstock qualified his judgment, observing that “these positive features of the Older Americans Act go hand-in-hand with a series of weaknesses,” including his assertion that “the extensive range of programmatic responsibilities has been elaborated without much sense of priority…consequently, the small amount of available funds is distributed relatively thinly among

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229 Ibid., 1838.
230 Ibid., 1840.
231 Ibid.
many objectives and is far from sufficient to make a substantial impact on any given problem.”\textsuperscript{232}

More bitingly, Binstock argued that “the programmatic agenda and the bureaucratic network have been developed with sufficient fanfare to create a cruel illusion that a variety of problems can eventually be solved through funding and implementation under the Older Americans Act.”\textsuperscript{233}

In other words, the Older Americans Act, despite its good intentions, had helped spawn a fragmented and dysfunctional national network of agencies designed to help older people, and this network had proven to be only modestly successful, given its sparse funding. Binstock therefore concluded that while “the Administration on Aging and a number of other agencies scattered throughout the federal government…are doing what they can to deal with an extensive agenda of social service and facility needs of older persons…the number of people these agencies can help is limited, given meager funding, lack of priorities, and cumbersome mechanisms for program implementation.”\textsuperscript{234} Instead of effectively tackling the problems of older people, Binstock argued, these programs were instead a form of window-dressing, “enacted and implemented by public officials in a fashion likely to solve the problems of public officials.”\textsuperscript{235}

In addition to castigating the officials responsible for the enactment and administration of the federal government’s programs, Binstock advanced the argument that these programs served to shelter elected officials from the wrath of old age advocacy groups, whose membership “represent an implied electoral force that politicians are not eager to alienate.”\textsuperscript{236} The Carter administration’s war on “excessive social programs” marked an emerging sea change in American attitudes towards

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 1841. As Binstock further observed, “by spending $112 billion on the elderly we are helping a great many people in a great many ways…yet 5.5 million persons, a quarter of the elderly population, are in severe financial distress. We have not improved the health status of the aged population since the introduction of Medicare and Medicaid. And a great many other problems of aging have only been met by token responses.” (Ibid.).
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 1844.
the infrastructure of federal programs which had been constructed a few years earlier. As Robert B. Hudson, a professor of social welfare at Brandeis University observed in 1978,

> the aging, long a favored social-welfare constituency in the United States, are in the early stages of being confronted with a series of obstacles which may put their favored status – and its concomitant material and symbolic benefits – in jeopardy. Rapidly rising public policy costs for meeting the needs of an aging population, a nascent but growing reassessment of policy benefits directed toward the elderly, and competitive pressures from other social-welfare constituencies are now threatening two of the aging’s longstanding political resources – their singular legitimacy and their political utility to other actors in the policy process.237

Hudson predicted that the “rapidly rising public policy costs” would increasingly give way to “competitive and cost-based pressures,” with the ultimate effect “being to produce a more inclusive and zero-sum politics of aging.”238 Put differently, Hudson was arguing that federal programs for the aging would soon be subjected to more stringent criticism, and that any new or costly policy initiatives would face determined opposition. The forty years between the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935 and the Carter administration had witnessed a haphazard movement in the direction of new and more expanded federal programs on behalf of the elderly; now, as was the case for other public assistance programs, the politics of old-age economic security had shifted more towards cost-cutting rather than program development. This development was partially attributable to the cost overruns associated with Medicare, which had caused the costs associated with that program to balloon to levels which had not been predicted by its architects.

But the primary culprit was the end of the sustained economic prosperity that had existed since the end of World War II. The expansion of Social Security after 1945, the enactment of Medicare, the Older Americans Act, and the creation of the SSI program had all been underwritten

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238 Ibid.
by the assumption that economic growth would allow the federal government to fulfill its promises to America’s older citizens. Taken together, these laws had also spurred the growth of a vast infrastructure of local and state offices and agencies designed to deal with the economic and social problems of the elderly. Collectively, they formed the senior state, a development of governmental power in twentieth century America that, dispersed broadly throughout the nation thanks to its emphasis on local administration and increasingly generous federal funding, proved to be far more resilient and better disguised than other public assistance programs. This distribution of power, while lending the senior state significant strength, also made it susceptible to duplication, fragmentation, and, ultimately, incoherence.

Additionally, the senior state had also benefitted from the near-monolithic racial background of its core constituency. Extending as far back as the original Social Security Act in 1935, older white middle-class people had been the most significant beneficiaries of the senior state, which effectively transferred significant sums of national wealth into specialized government assistance programs that tended to benefited them. As Ira Katznelson has highlighted, life expectancy rates during this period differed significantly between whites and African-Americans. In 1947, for example, whites could expect to live an average of eleven years longer than African-Americans.239 By 1975, this gap had narrowed somewhat, but the average life expectancy of African-American men remained 63.7 years – old enough to qualify for early retirement under Social Security’s rules, but not old enough to qualify for full retirement benefits. In contrast, the average life expectancy for white men in 1975 stood at 69.5 years – long enough to take advantage of Social Security’s full retirement age, then pegged at 67 years of age.240

239 Ira Katznelson, When Affirmative Action Was White, 34.
This racial disparity remained an increasingly sore point for minority elderly advocacy groups. As Hobart C. Jackson, the director of the National Caucus on the Black Aged bitterly complained in 1973, “nothing of a substantive nature of any consequence” had been accomplished for many elderly African-Americans, despite the significant new amounts of federal funding that had been poured into the senior state.241 Instead, Jackson claimed that elderly African-Americans lived in a situation of “multiple jeopardy” because of their age, race, and poverty, and pointed out that one-third of elderly African-Americans lived at or below the federal poverty level, whereas 24.6% of the overall elderly population (including all racial groups) lived at or below the federal poverty level.242

Jackson’s criticisms highlighted one of the less obvious elements crucial to the success of the senior state. Beginning with the struggle for Social Security and old-age pensions in the 1930s, reformers had sought to create a form of retirement security that would preserve the “dignity” of male white workers by preventing them from becoming financial dependents upon either their families or their local communities, and to thereby ease the transition to retirement from the active

241 In particular, Jackson pointed out that while elderly African-Americans (defined as men and women aged 65 years or older) constituted 8% of the total 65+ elderly population in the United States, only 4 percent of public housing tenants and 4 per cent of patients in nursing homes were black. See “U.S. Said to Lag on Aid to Aged Blacks: Statistics Are Cited,” The New York Times, May 20, 1973. Jackson’s sentiments were not his alone. As another member of the National Caucus on the Black Aged observed, “as blacks, we were born into America with one strike against us, and now that we’re old and poor, we have three strikes against us.” See “Elderly Negroes Present Demands,” The New York Times, November 4, 1971. Additionally, as a 1971 report commissioned by the U.S. Senate’s Special Committee on Aging found, in 1969, “33 percent of all [African-Americans] aged 65 or older who lived alone or with nonrelatives had total annual incomes below $1,000 [$6,539.70 in 2016 dollars] – compared with 14 percent for elderly whites.” Furthermore, the report observed that “perhaps the most economically disadvantaged are older [African-American] women. Approximately 79 percent of aged [African-American] women who live alone have incomes below the poverty line…the net impact of these figures is that almost nine out of every 10 elderly [African-American] women living alone would be classified as poor or near poor.” See U.S. Congress, Senate, A Pre-White House Conference on Aging Summary of Developments and Data: A Report of the Special Committee on Aging, United States Senate, Together with Minority and Supplemental Views, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., S. Rep. 92-505, 56-57, available at: https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/reports/rpt1071.pdf (accessed March 15, 2017).

work force and the social role of family breadwinner. The Townsend Movement had seized upon this impulse and broadened it to include both men and women, though with implicit understanding that the most deserving of the nation’s elderly population were its native-born, white, Protestant members.

In its initial design and operation, Social Security had replicated some of these assumptions by privileging the labor of some selected categories of predominantly white male workers, and the postwar flood of private pensions implemented in numerous industries had further reinforced this orientation. The expansion of social and community services in select localities like New York and southern California had advanced under the aegis of private and public welfare agencies there, but the enactment of the Older Americans Act and its subsequent expansions during the late 1960s and into the mid-1970s had helped to separate anti-poverty programs for the elderly from the far more controversial efforts of the Office of Economic Opportunity and longer-established “welfare” units such as the Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

In effect, the federal government, in conjunction with state and local governments, consciously worked to camouflage and disguise these programs and thereby distinguish them from “welfare.” This artificial distinction allowed politicians and old-age advocacy groups, as well as senior citizens themselves, to accept them while avoiding the stigma of receiving “handouts” or being on a “dole,” and to do so in a way that did not seriously threaten to upset the existing balance of political power and distribution of wealth in American society.

The different results that the senior state produced – despite the efforts during the War on Poverty to broaden assistance to elderly minorities – was evident by the early 1970s, as Hobart Jackson’s criticisms suggested. Elderly white poverty had significantly declined during this period, so much so that the county poorhouse or poor farm became a distant if not entirely forgotten memory in many white communities, especially in the new suburban housing developments of the
postwar era. As thin and stretched as the nation’s social safety net for the elderly sometimes was, it had largely succeeded in assuring a modicum of economic security for many older white, middle-class Americans, but this success had been implicitly predicated upon active federal assistance and assured economic growth.

By the mid-1970s, economic growth could no longer be assured, and programs for the elderly, even those for middle-class, white people, began to experience the kind of political censure and opprobrium once reserved for the Civil War veterans’ pensions and for the state level old-age pension movements that had cropped up in many western states during the 1930s and 1940s. That Social Security and Medicare were designed to function like contributory, social insurance programs became a programmatic distinction that was increasingly lost in the fray as anti-statist conservatives directed their ire at federal welfare programs. While overt challenges to the stability of either Medicare or Social Security proved to be too politically dangerous – as Ronald Reagan learned in 1981 when his proposals to “reform” Social Security spurred a furious public backlash – the less well-known local and state programs inaugurated under the Older Americans Act remained far better shielded because of their relative anonymity and because of the vested stake so many local communities had in their continued existence.
CONCLUSION

Between the Great Depression and the onset of the new protracted economic crisis of the mid-1970s, the relationship between the government – federal, state, and local – and older Americans underwent a dramatic transformation. Brought together by an unlikely and at times unwieldy coalition of public officials, representatives of the organized labor movement, and specialized academic experts, government at all levels of the United States sought to provide social and economic support to older Americans sufficient to raise them out of poverty. In doing so, public officials assumed a primary role in a field of social welfare policy which had previously been considered the exclusive realm of either individual families, private voluntary organizations, or other parts of American civil society. The creation of this new governmental role was haphazard and subject to bitter, conflicting arguments over what the proper role of government should be in this area, but ultimately it produced a stable and lasting outcome by the 1970s, namely, a significant expansion of federal social welfare activities, programs, and initiatives on behalf of older Americans, which I have collectively labeled the “senior state.”

Viewed from the vantage point of the 1920s, the creation of the senior state over the course of the next forty years could not have been foreseen, save for a handful of marginal advocates like Abraham Epstein who believed that the United States needed to develop an old-age pension system if it was to take its place as duly modern society. Epstein’s belief – really, his hope – ran against powerful currents in American society, which militated against the enactment of any such system. As Theda Skocpol has shown, the United States developed a *de facto* old age pension system in the five decades following the end of the Civil War, as national and state Republican politicians in the victorious northern states successfully joined hands with various Union veterans’ organizations to
expand previously modest veteran pensions into a much broader mechanism for federal old-age relief and support than had been the original intent of those pensions.

The belief that public old-age pensions were susceptible to corruption, whether political or moral, was coupled with an increasing emphasis by Progressive thinkers on the virtues of old-age social insurance, whereby workers helped to fund their own future needs as retirees no longer actively participating in the workforce. This model of old-age provision, which was modeled on private commercial insurance concepts, enjoyed growing popularity among Progressive academics and politicians, who wanted to eradicate old-age poverty without running the risk of bankrupting local, state, or federal governments with overly generous, non-contributory pensions derived from general revenue streams that, unlike the Civil War veterans’ pensions, might prove impossible to repeal or curtail once enacted.

This debate over the merits of old-age pensions versus old-age insurance remained largely confined to more progressive political circles in the United States during the 1920s. By contrast, many corporate leaders and their allies in elected government and the legal system viewed both old-age pensions and old-age insurance as abhorrent and an unjustified usurpation by government of functions which it was not entitled to undertake, and which could, if left unchecked, threaten the ability of corporations to govern their internal affairs as they saw fit. While some of these corporations embraced a model of corporate welfare that was at times unabashedly paternalistic in how it viewed the plight of older workers, that paternalism was grounded in the belief that relations between employers and employees should be marked by a genial reciprocity and immune from external intrusion by third party actors, be it government or labor unions. While many corporate leaders embraced old-age pensions as part of their collective responsibility to their workers, these pensions reached only a fraction of the overall population, and even then they were usually insufficient to maintain an adequate standard of living. Many older people – especially those who
could not fall back on agricultural employment to sustain them – continued to rely on a mixture of savings and assistance from either their kinship networks or voluntary organizations like mutual aid societies or religious institutions. Those who could not found themselves with few options for survival, and this fragile, insecure network of assistance ensured that county poor farms and city poorhouses remained busy in the United States well into the twentieth century.

The Great Depression upset this existing balance of affairs, and helped to radically redefine understandings of old-age poverty and economic insecurity in the United States. The catastrophic spread of unemployment between 1929 and 1933 led to an unprecedented strain on existing channels of public and private relief, and the collapse of the stock market and subsequent failure of banks throughout the nation had essentially wiped out the savings of thousands of people, a point underscored by Franklin Roosevelt in his first inaugural address. Because unemployment was so widespread – and because the collapse of so many banks triggered crippling ripple effects on the economic life of numerous communities – it became increasingly implausible to argue that unemployment and poverty in old age were merely the fault of lackadaisical individuals. Recognizing the need to provide some kind of emergency assistance to the growing number of impoverished elderly people within their borders, individual States – including previously reluctant states like New York – now embraced old-age pensions as both a needed measure to sustain individuals who through no fault of their own had become impoverished and who had little prospect of competing for employment against younger workers.

The level of support provided by these newly created state-level pensions, though, was frequently inadequate, and such pensions varied from state to state. Moreover, as late as 1932, only
seventeen of the forty-eight states had enacted pensions, though that number rose to thirty by 1935.\textsuperscript{1} As the Depression worsened, it remained an open question whether the states which had enacted old-age pensions would continue to have either the revenues or the political resolve sufficient to adequately fund the pension obligations they had legally committed themselves to. With traditional sources of assistance either desiccated or in the process of collapse, and new sources of assistance largely unequal to the burden being placed upon them, the way forward remained unclear for Americans of all ages, though older Americans arguably had fewer options than most. The election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 brought with it hope that the Depression might soon be lifted, provided that the instruments necessary for the well-functioning of the nation’s economy be restored to good working order. As the Roosevelt administration worked to tackle these issues, though, the issue of alleviating old-age poverty remained largely unaddressed, despite some Congressional efforts to compel action.

The administration hoped that Social Security’s old-age assistance program would remain a temporary feature of the law, at least until the old-age insurance system was fully operational, after which time the old-age assistance program would diminish over time as more and more younger workers shifted into the old-age insurance system once they retired from the workforce. This gradual approach, though, while highly pleasing to state officials who could now call upon a much larger source of monetary support to augment existing state-level pensions, did not fully extinguish the popular discontent which had fueled the Townsend Movement to national prominence. Right up to the period of America’s entry into World War II in 1941, the Townsend Movement and other like-minded groups continued to agitate for the repeal of Social Security and the institution of a more generous universal old-age pension system, and the continuing implicit threat of popular

support for a newer, better organized version of the Townsend Movement helped the Roosevelt administration to persuade Congress in 1939 to enact the first of numerous amendments to the Social Security Act which were designed to accelerate the operation of the old-age insurance system and increase the amount of benefits to be paid out under the old-age insurance system.

The appeal of the Townsend Movement and other similar groups in California and Colorado was temporarily dampened by the wartime mobilization of the American economy, which had commenced in earnest well before formal American entry into World War II. The tightening labor market, fueled by rapidly increasing defense spending, helped to drive national unemployment back down to levels not seen since before the onset of the Great Depression. Many older Americans benefitted from this tightening labor market, which allowed them to either continue working or to find new employment opportunities. The effect of the improving economy on the old-age pension movement was reflected by the significantly diminished stature of the Townsend Movement and other similar groups, which found that their central demand for a guaranteed old-age pension now enjoyed at best a middling amount of support on the national level. At the state level, efforts continued in California and Colorado to enact broader state-level old-age pensions, with mixed results to show for it.

The breathtaking productivity of the American economy during World War II, only temporarily lessened the popular support that had been essential to groups advocating a broader old-age pension system in the United States. Mindful that the war would sooner or later end and that significant reforms of the American social welfare state were still required, the Roosevelt administration had commissioned the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB), a small government agency, to undertake a study of needed measures in order to build on the still half-complete foundations laid by the Social Security Act. As the nation recovered economically from the Depression, its zeal for the sort of broad experimentation which the New Deal embodied,
including the Social Security Act, began to wane, and between 1938 and 1942, a Congress that had been amenable to the Roosevelt administration was gradually replaced with a more skeptical one that was eager to hold the line on any further social policy experiments. Watching the political winds shift, and still dependent upon Southern Democrats for their support of measures needed to fight World War II, the Roosevelt administration effectively sidelined the NRPB, and with it the hope that Social Security might be broadened and expanded along the lines of the Beveridge Plan then taking shape in the United Kingdom.

In addition to recharging business interests in the United States, World War II also greatly amplified the overall membership strength of many labor unions, as workers flooded into factories across the nation. Despite growing membership numbers, unions were unable to press for increased wages, having vowed not to strike for the duration of the war. Instead, modifications made to the federal tax code beginning in 1942 encouraged private employers to supplement wages with other fringe benefits tied to employment, such as health insurance and private pensions. After the end of World War II, a wave of strikes by unions to demand increased wages met with fierce counter-resistance on the part of corporate interests, who successfully pushed the Taft-Hartley Act through Congress in 1947. Taft-Hartley restricted numerous union activities and made it easier for hostile employers to hinder union organizing efforts. A bitter, protracted conflict between numerous labor unions and major corporate employers like General Motors during the late 1940s resulted in the development of new collective bargaining agreements that fueled the growth of private health and economic security benefits tied to private employment, which in turn served as a template for other industries.

The growth of a private welfare state was also made possible by the failure of the Truman administration to revive a New Deal-style reform agenda for socially progressive legislation. Despite the valiant efforts of Truman administration officials, efforts to secure enactment of national
health insurance failed due to the implacable opposition of the American Medical Association (AMA) and various business groups, which conducted a highly successful public relations campaign that persuaded many Americans that national health insurance represented an unjustified expansion of the federal government’s power which would inevitably pave the way to Soviet-style statism in the United States.

After the failure to enact national health insurance, officials within the Truman administration as well as outside experts in organized labor and academia began working on a new legislative proposal designed to enact universal health insurance, but only for older Americans, in the hope that such a program would meet with a less hostile response from the AMA and from the general public and would therefore stand a better chance of being enacted.

Enactment of any sort of national health insurance plan, though, was forestalled by the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower to the presidency in 1952; despite his latter-day reputation as a political moderate, Eisenhower was a self-described political conservative who remained obdurately opposed to the enactment of national health insurance until near the end of his administration, when he begrudgingly acquiesced to the enactment of the Kerr-Mills Act. Kerr-Mills provided some federal funding to individual state programs designed to assist indigent elderly people in need of medical assistance, but it was not universally available to all senior citizens. Quiet backroom attempts by senior Eisenhower administration officials like Marion Folsom to persuade private commercial insurers to offer health insurance plans geared towards older people were rejected by those insurers as unprofitable ventures, even after the Eisenhower administration offered to “re-insure” such plans in order to safeguard against possible losses by private insurers.2

While the Eisenhower administration did battle with congressional Democrats over the fate of numerous health insurance proposals, it proved more willing to sign important amendments to the Social Security Act into law. These amendments expanded the categories of workers covered by the Act, raised monthly benefit payments, and ultimately strengthened the old age insurance system’s finances while helping to halt and reverse the growth of Social Security’s old age assistance program, an ostensibly temporary Depression-era measure that had continued to survive well past its intended termination thanks to the support of southern Democrats.

These developments at the national level, a gradual expansion of Social Security coupled with an impasse over national health insurance, intensified the pressures on state and local officials to deal with a growing and frequently financially insecure cohort of older Americans. Localities like New York City, which had perhaps the largest single concentration of older people within its borders by virtue of being the nation’s largest city, resorted to public-private partnerships with philanthropic organizations based in the city. Other places such as California witnessed the re-ignition of old battles over improved state-level old age pensions.

By the late 1950s, a new alternative to both of these approaches had appeared in southern California. The American Association of Retired Persons (A.A.R.P.), a private voluntary organization founded by Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, a former high school principal in Los Angeles, was the first major national organization to offer a low-cost health insurance plan open to older Americans without requiring a prior medical examination. This innovative plan, along with a mail-in prescription drug service, attracted a membership that quickly swelled into the hundreds of thousands as older Americans flocked to the A.A.R.P. The nascent organization also benefitted from close ties to the Eisenhower administration and support from the American Medical Association, both of which were eager to demonstrate that legislation to provide health insurance for older Americans via the Social Security system was an unnecessary expenditure of public funds.
The rise of the A.A.R.P. was complemented by an emerging partnership between public officials and academic experts to examine the living and economic conditions of older Americans. In case studies throughout the nation, academic researchers demonstrated that many of the existing assumptions about the lives and needs of older Americans were either outdated or unwarranted, and argued that a new, proactive approach on the part of local communities could help remedy a significant portion of the social and economic problems faced by older people.

Similarly, new biomedical and social science research demonstrated that many older people could remain productive members of society, but that many lacked the opportunity to do so. Beginning in New York, Ann Arbor, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, local officials implemented new social service programs in conjunction with local academic and social welfare experts, a process that depended upon an infusion of funds from private sources and state aid. By and large, these programs offered assistance to older people that was designed to help them find affordable housing, enjoy access to continuing education and vocational training opportunities, or to serve as volunteers in their communities. Many of these programs were relatively small in nature, but they frequently enjoyed support from local officials, labor unions, and religious institutions, most of whom saw them as expression of the local community’s capacity to serve the needs of vulnerable citizens.

The gradual emergence of these local and state level programs and the sudden appearance of the A.A.R.P. during the 1950s augured a new direction for policy initiatives designed to assist older Americans. These efforts also enjoyed an unexpected boost from the federal government. In 1950 and again in 1961, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations had hosted national conferences ostensibly dedicated to examining the problems of older Americans. Hovering over both conferences, though, was the issue of providing health insurance for older people, an issue which increasingly became the prime objective of many reformers during this period.
More importantly, at both conferences, federal officials worked painstakingly to assemble an array of experts from a wide variety of disciplines at each conference, in essence helping to construct a new defined community of experts who could then exchange knowledge and expertise. These experts, in turn, produced new proposals for areas in which the federal, state, and local governments could cooperate, and while many of these proposals did not get enacted into law, their very existence marked the emergence of a new, coherent body of experts upon whom federal officials would draw from during the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s in order to evaluate existing federal programs for the elderly and to devise new ones as needed.

For the moment, the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 suggested that it might be possible to break the federal impasse over national health insurance which had solidified over the course of the previous decade and a half. The Kennedy administration worked closely to cultivate senior citizens as a voting bloc during the 1960 campaign and after its narrow electoral victory, numerous labor and social welfare experts were placed into important domestic policy positions throughout the new administration. Persuaded by the AFL-CIO that supporting the enactment of health insurance for senior citizens via the Social Security system could broaden his appeal to older voters, Kennedy publicly committed himself in 1960 to the enactment of Medicare, and consequently his administration lobbied hard for the passage of Medicare repeatedly between 1961 and 1963.

These efforts were largely in vain. Congressional opposition, especially that of Rep. Wilbur Mills, the powerful Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, withstood the attempts by both the Kennedy administration and organized labor (including the National Council of Senior Citizens, an AFL-CIO funded group whose main purpose was to advocate for the enactment of Medicare). It was not until after Kennedy’s assassination, and Lyndon Johnson’s sweeping victory in 1964, that the Kennedy-Johnson administration could count on a working legislative majority that
was amenable to the passage of Medicare. Even with healthy congressional majorities, though, the Johnson administration withstood the wrath of the American Medical Association (AMA) and its congressional supporters. In order to placate the AMA, the Johnson administration and its coalition of allies (including the American Hospital Association and Blue Cross & Blue Shield) embraced a compromise solution that folded existing federal health care legislation (the Kerr-Mills Act) along with new legislation designed to provide universal health care insurance to all Americans over the age of 65. The new legislation was explicitly modeled on Social Security’s contributory old age insurance model, and ultimately proved largely satisfactory to the complex and conflicting demands of the various groups involved in its enactment.3

While the years-long fight to enact Medicare had dominated much of the political agenda at the national level, it also had the effect of galvanizing broader interest in the problems of older Americans. The publication of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, as well as numerous newspaper stories and investigations revealed just how financially precarious the lives of many older people remained, despite the gradual improvement of the Social Security system and the proliferation of private pension systems since the end of World War II. While the living standards of some older Americans had undoubtedly been improved by these changes, for many others – especially minority older Americans and older Americans in more rural, agricultural communities – these improvements were less pronounced

The growing attention that rising old age poverty attracted during the early 1960s helped to justify the enactment of Medicare, and it also helped spur congressional interest in new initiatives besides Medicare to arrest rising poverty rates among older Americans. Through a series of well-publicized hearings and investigations, congressional committees – especially the U.S. Senate’s Special Committee on Aging – helped bring to light the manifold economic problems which

confronted many older people, which included not only access to affordable health care, but also inadequate housing, insufficient employment opportunities, and growing social isolation. Existing state and local programs – especially in New York City – had been able to assist many older people, but as repeated hearings made clear, such efforts were not enough. Congress in 1965 therefore enacted legislation designed to provide additional federal funding to state and local level agencies, with the intention that such funding would be used to support existing community social service programs and to promote the creation of new ones. Additionally, Congress directed that a new government agency, the Administration on Aging, be created in order to coordinate and monitor federal involvement in these state and local programs, and to serve as a clearinghouse for information and new initiatives at the federal level. The Congress also attempted to apply pressure on the newly-created Office of Economic Opportunity, the Johnson administration’s hastily assembled lead agency in the War on Poverty, to do more to combat elderly poverty.

Unfortunately, Congressional efforts to cajole the Office of Economic Opportunity to take a more proactive stance in battling elderly poverty proved largely for naught for two reasons. First, the key decision-makers within the Office of Economic Opportunity had decided to direct their efforts on breaking the “cycle of poverty,” which they not unreasonably believed to be most acute in urban communities throughout the nation. They therefore directed their time and energies to supporting vocational training and local Community Action Agencies with the intention of empowering traditionally disempowered poor and working-class people. More often than not, though, the “poor” whom the OEO tried to assist were young people, in the belief that helping young people acquire the skills and training necessary to participate in a competitive labor market would enable them to escape from poverty and set them on the path to upward economic mobility. This conception of the “poor,” therefore had less to offer the elderly poor, whom OEO officials assumed received sufficient assistance from existing government agencies like the Social Security
Administration and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (the predecessor of the present-day Department of Health and Human Services).

Secondly, the OEO’s belated efforts in the late 1960s to support local-level initiatives aimed at eradicating poverty met with significant backlash from increasingly well-organized senior citizens’ lobbying groups, who feared that OEO’s involvement in such programs would taint them as being a form of undesirable welfare. Frustrated with the OEO’s slow progress in addressing elderly poverty, the Johnson administration began to explore alternative methods for using the federal government’s resources to develop programs oriented around the needs of older people. The Administration on Aging, which had been created in part to serve this purpose, remained largely on the bureaucratic sidelines as various Executive Branch departments – including the Departments of Health, Education, and Welfare, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development – josted for control of the administration’s agenda on this issue. Eventually, much of the agenda fell into the hands of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

Beginning in 1967, the administration successfully launched a renewed push to enact a broad agenda on behalf of older Americans, which included significantly increased funding to federal-state programs originally supported by the Older Americans Act of 1965, additional improvements to the Social Security Act, and the enactment of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, which attempted to replicate state-level laws against age discrimination at the national level. Taken together, these laws greatly enhanced the role of the federal government in supporting a wide variety of programs for older Americans, many of which effectively functioned as de facto anti-poverty programs in local communities by providing part-time employment and social service opportunities to older Americans that would otherwise have been unavailable. On the whole, these programs were designed to re-integrate senior citizens into their local communities by providing them with socially desirable functions that allowed them to assist other at-risk individuals (as in the
case of the Foster Grandparents Program, whereby elderly people served as mentors and surrogate family to neighborhood children). For the most part, however, these programs did not tackle a lot of the systemic, root causes of elderly poverty, but rather sought to act as palliatives.

Alongside these new programs, the Johnson administration also convened multiple task forces in 1966 and 1968 to examine the issue of income maintenance. These Task Forces helped drive the administration’s push to increase Social Security and public assistance benefits, and also suggested that the administration’s receptiveness to growing demands on both the political left and right that the government institute a universal, guaranteed income program in lieu of the patchwork of existing aid programs which provided assistance largely on a categorical basis. The growing movement behind the guaranteed income program, though, would receive an unexpected boost of support from the frequently unorthodox administration of Richard Nixon, who succeeded Johnson as President in 1969. In August 1969, Nixon proposed replacing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, along with a host of other welfare programs, with a new guaranteed basic annual income program that would make federal assistance more uniform throughout the country. Nixon’s proposal, the Family Assistance Program (FAP) – originally authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan – ran into stiff resistance from Congress and advocacy groups on both the political left and the right who remained unpersuaded that FAP represented a better model than the existing social welfare system framework. Attempts to enact FAP in 1970 and again in 1972 failed due to this opposition.

While the Nixon administration pressed for the enactment of FAP, it embraced federal support for Great Society-era initiatives for older Americans. The administration conducted vigorous outreach to older Americans, and also revived the template for federal-state cooperation on

issues related to older Americans which the 1961 White House Conference on Aging had helped to set. By skillfully employing many of the veterans of the Eisenhower administration, the Nixon administration worked diligently to improve and support the existing infrastructure of federal programs for older people, even as it worked to erode other anti-poverty programs which had been created as part of the Great Society. After the failure of the Nixon administration to secure the enactment of FAP, Nixon ultimately signed into law major improvements to Social Security, including the creation of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, a new means-based program that supplemented Social Security’s old-age assistance program.5

SSI represented a partial enactment of FAP, and its helped to further solidify the patchwork infrastructure of government programs and initiatives which had been erected over the course of the previous forty years. Its reaffirmed the willingness of federal officials to support programs designed to improve the economic security of older Americans as well as their lack of enthusiasm to do the same on a universal basis for all Americans. This commitment would wax and wane at times after the mid-1970s, when the relatively stable period of postwar economic growth that had made the bipartisan enlargement of the American welfare state politically plausible began to fade.

In its stead, a new bipartisan coalition began to emerge which prized paring back the programs of the American welfare state, including programs for the elderly, which were increasingly deemed to be an unreasonable burden upon the federal government. Attempts to act on these criticisms were not always successful, as Ronald Reagan’s failed attempt to significantly reduce Social Security benefits in 1981 revealed. Yet a new ethos had emerged by the mid-1980s, which argued that government programs for the elderly were essentially assistance bestowed upon

an “undeserving” group, a stark reversal from the assumptions that guided the creation and extension of such programs for the previous half century.

Yet, because of the manner of its creation and the practical demands associated with its administration, the senior state proved to be surprisingly resilient, despite the rise to power of a postwar conservative movement in the United States whose appeal has been predicated in part on anti-statist rhetoric and actions. In particular, the senior state drew its strength from several core factors. First, while it was largely funded by the federal government, much of its administration has been done at the state and local levels. This design has helped to inoculate it from anti-statist political criticism and to confer legitimacy upon it in the eyes of state and local politicians whose willingness to participate in federal-led initiatives could not necessarily be assumed, a fact borne out by the far less successful experience of the Office of Economic Opportunity’s Community Action Program during the heyday of the Great Society. Unlike the anti-poverty initiatives launched as part of the senior state, the OEO’s Community Action Program’s community action agencies frequently lacked institutional support at the state and local level sufficient to buttress it from criticisms, and its direct threat to established local sachems ensured that once federal support was removed, both the OEO and the Community Action Program’s days would be numbered.

By contrast, the senior state’s anti-poverty initiatives were considerably lower profile, and did not seek to displace or directly challenge existing configurations of power in a way that would threaten local politicians or pose a threat to existing economic conditions. Instead, the senior state’s programs increasingly aimed to replicate functions which might have performed privately by individual families, that is to say, outside of the realm of market relations. While these functions had traditionally not been performed by the federal government, local officials welcomed them as a way to amplify limited financial resources.
In fact, the key to the success of the senior state has been its ability to neatly sidestep the political and social tension between popular demands for local political autonomy and the ability of the federal government to formulate workable national solutions to pressing social and economic problems in American society. As Barry Karl observed over thirty years ago in *The Uneasy State*, “Americans have had a peculiar problem when it comes to identifying themselves as a nation,” and this problem owes much to the tension in American life between the competing forces of nationalism and localism as well as the impasse between the “autonomous individual” and the need for collective action to resolve systemic social issues.6

Instead of beginning as a federal initiative, the senior state arose gradually, organically, and in disparate pieces throughout the United States, and did so in a manner and at a pace largely dictated by local and state officials. It began in localities like New York City and California where the numerous problems created by inadequate existing social safety nets meant that local officials, usually in conjunction with funding assistance from private philanthropic organizations, were obliged to respond first, and to devise policy solutions in areas as varied as housing, regular medical care, employment assistance, and access to long-term assisted living facilities for the significant number of senior citizens who lived there. Local officials, working in conjunction with a growing network of private social welfare experts and philanthropic organizations, developed experimental solutions in order to try and resolve the social and economic problems of older Americans. Some of these solutions, like subsidizing public housing for the elderly and enacting legal protections to prevent discrimination in the workplace against older workers, eventually percolated upwards to the national level as federal officials searched for solutions that would be both constitutional and

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financially feasible, given limited staff expertise in many federal agencies and modest funding allocated by Congress.

The senior state owed its origins to more than just the needs of local and state officials trying to make adaptations to the range of municipal services offered to their older citizens. It also came into being because of larger societal changes in the United States that were unique to the post-World War II era. The mass suburbanization of the American population during the postwar era and the continued out-migration of younger people from rural areas of the American South, the Great Plains, and New England meant that numerous rural and urban communities were facing the prospect of a dwindling local population as well as a correspondingly declining number of younger workers capable of supporting both a growing older population’s needs and other necessary governmental services. This redistribution of population and economic resources meant that local and state officials who in other circumstances or contexts might have been suspicious of or might have rejected any federal role in setting social welfare policy were far more receptive to it, especially if participation in federal programs or initiatives included eligibility for federal funds without necessarily being subject to federal oversight.

For this reason, Social Security’s noncontributory old-age assistance program proved to be remarkably popular among southern Democrats who were otherwise deeply skeptical that any expansion of the federal government’s power might impinge upon the existing social and economic structure of the American South, despite the fact that it was originally intended to only be a temporary, Depression-era measure to bolster the meager financial support that many individual states provided to their older citizens. Instead, southern Democrats happily supported the program, which provided matching federal funds that generously supplemented comparatively meager state pensions for older people. In many instances, Social Security’s old age assistance program was erected on top of existing state level pension programs, thus providing those programs with a flush
new source of guaranteed support, which helped to endear the program to traditionally impoverished agricultural Southern states that hitherto had only been able to appropriate limited funding to their state pensions. Additionally, the de-centralized administration of Social Security’s old-age assistance program meant that southern states like Louisiana and Mississippi could shape it largely according to their own racial prerogatives, which frequently meant that older whites benefitted from the program more than older African-Americans did. In effect, Social Security’s old-age assistance program became a prime means of support for older, impoverished white people in many Southern states, which helped to win it lasting support among both elected officials and the public.

It was not until the late 1940s and into the early 1950s that this imbalance by design in favor of Social Security’s old-age assistance program rather than its old-age insurance program began to be corrected, but that only came after southern Democrats found themselves temporarily shut out of power during the years of unified Republican control of the White House and Congress between 1953 and 1955 and thus unable to prevent the expansion and shoring up of Social Security’s old-age insurance program.

It was not just Southern Democrats, though, who stood to benefit from an expanded federal role in providing relief to older people. Key western states like California and Colorado were subject to a long-running battle during the 1930s and 1940s between old-age pension advocacy groups like the Townsend Movement and their opponents, with the balance of power frequently seesawing between each side. As discussed in chapters two and three, state level pensions were frequently enacted one year, only to be repealed the next, a cycle which helped to keep sustain and

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amplify popular fears elsewhere that the American polity might be overtly susceptible to the appeals of unscrupulous demagogues.  

The prospect of more generous pensions being enacted by individual states also led the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to begrudgingly embrace the expansion of Social Security’s old-age insurance program as a more responsible and less costly alternative. Essentially, the business community believed that it faced a choice between higher pensions paid for out of general revenue streams (and therefore higher taxes) or improvements to the part of Social Security which required workers to contribute to their own retirement security. Fearful of inflation and higher taxes to support a broader welfare state than already existed, the business community chose to throw its support behind Social Security’s old age insurance provisions, thus validating and protecting it from its opponents. Likewise, the Eisenhower administration dutifully supported expansions to the Social Security program, which placed its old-age insurance rather than its old-age assistance program at its core, a stark reversal from the programmatic evolution which had taken place in the twenty decades since Social Security was first enacted in 1935.

These expansions of Social Security’s old age insurance program were welcomed by local officials in urban localities like Chicago and New York, which had historically received at best a modest amount of support from Social Security’s old-age assistance program, despite the fact that the old-age assistance program was financed out of more general revenues. In these cities, as well as in other areas with a large population of industrial workers, local officials continued to lobby for further improvements to Social Security. However, expanded eligibility and benefits under the Social Security old-age assistance program, while helpful to many older people, did not necessarily benefit all older people, especially those individuals who had not contributed into Social Security.

8 See chapter 2, 51-52 and chapter 3, 24-26.
either because they had not “worked” (as was the case with many older women) or because they were not included in the classes of workers eligible to receive benefits from Social Security. For these older people, who faced diminished prospects of access to the workforce (usually due to a combination of lack of formal education or relevant prior experience), local officials found that more efforts on the part of government were needed in order to prevent relief rolls from swelling up with older people.

The growth of these programs and services designed to meet the needs of older Americans without resorting to more dramatic solutions like the creation of a public jobs program for older people represented a curious compromise: a broadening range of services and programs were enacted in order to assist older people, programs that might have been far more controversial had they been enacted in order to benefit other groups of people within American society. Many of the programs enacted to assist older Americans tended to benefit a constituency that remained both whiter and poorer than the country as a whole. While other programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were tarred as a form of support to a racially undeserving group, programs designed to assist the elderly enjoyed a much happier fate. For example, even after the slow dissolution of the OEO had begun in 1969, its decidedly modest anti-poverty programs for the elderly were folded back into other existing executive branch agencies such as the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. While many of these programs were financed out of general tax revenues, a key sore point in many of the critiques surrounding other War on Poverty programs as well as the AFDC program, no such critique attached itself to government programs for the elderly.

Rather, such programs enjoyed the cozy insulation provided not just by an increasingly vocal lobby on their behalf (chiefly the AARP), but also by a healthy bipartisan consensus that viewed them as essential to the well-functioning of local communities. This consensus had its origins in the enactment of the original Social Security Act, but its development accelerated between the end of
World War II and the 1960s. Experts on the problems of aging and older Americans formed a nexus of academic research and investigation at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan and other leading universities, and the collective output of these individuals helped to legitimate government programs for the elderly. Not infrequently, many of these researchers moved back and forth between the academy and various levels of government, and working with elected officials they were able to develop policies that could be tailored to local communities and funded from a mixture of public and private sources. This close relationship between policymakers and academic experts helped to ensure that the programs of the senior state enjoyed a social legitimacy – even prestige – that other social welfare programs were not able to acquire.

In sum, the combination of these distinct factors: bipartisan support at the local, state, and federal levels of government, sustained academic interest and research, and backing from organized labor, which helped to make the emergence of the senior state possible, and which protected its programs from the strong anti-statist currents of American politics. While relatively modest in comparison to the benefits and programs provided by other industrialized nations to their older population, the protections extended by the American state to older Americans are markedly more generous than those afforded other categories of needy people in the United States. The development of the senior state, even in the face of historical hostility to both assistance programs and to the active, in-depth involvement by the federal government in local and state social welfare matters, is a mark of the success of the unlikely coalition of social welfare experts, elected officials, and organized labor leaders who brought it into being. Even when the economic conditions that had supported its expansion began to disappear, the relatively low-profile, indirect nature of assistance ensured that it would survive, even as other government programs did not.

The significance of the senior state in postwar American history lies in how it allowed federal, state, and local officials to provide needed public assistance to the elderly, and to do so in a
way that successfully camouflaged the true nature of that assistance by placing it within the confines of community service and part-time employment programs. Taken together with the broad expansions to Social Security between 1939 and 1973 and the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid, the amount of federal action on behalf of the nation’s elderly population was all the more impressive, given the relatively small percentage of Americans over the age of 65 during the period between 1930 and 1970 as a portion of the overall national population. It also reflected a significant evolution in how the federal, state, and local governments had dealt with the issue of providing support (economic and otherwise) to older people. The poorhouse and the county poor farm system that predated the New Deal had been predicated upon a dual mission of uplift and deterrence, and in that spirit, the few old-age pension laws that had existed before the Great Depression and the New Deal had provided fairly minimal levels of assistance, and even that assistance was usually predicated upon continued individual family contributions to the upkeep and maintenance of elderly family members.

Within the framework of this system, many elderly effectively became dependent wards. As Hendrik Hartog’s study of wills and inheritances in New Jersey during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century suggests, elderly people who were able to went to significant lengths to try and guarantee their continued economic independence, and did so by entering into formal and informal contractual relationships with friends and family members to effectively trade care in their old age for compensation from their estates upon their decease. In essence, those elderly people who could afford to swap financial assets for some modicum of security did so, while others who could not found themselves confronted with far less attractive options.

9 In 1930, Americans aged 65 years or older constituted 5.4% of the total U.S. population; by 1970, this figure had risen to 9.9% of the total U.S. population. See U.S. Census Bureau, Demographic Trends in the 20th Century: Census 2000 Special Reports, by Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Figure 2-4, Percent Distribution of the Total Population by Age: 1900 to 2000, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 56.
The growth and development of the senior state during the course of the twentieth century significantly revised this formulation. The economic security, health security, and necessary social services for many elderly people were gradually shifted away from individual families and localities, and the financial risks and costs of old-age were subsidized instead by the general population in the form of both specialized payroll taxes and general revenues. This shift released many but not all elderly individuals and their families from the concerns that had dogged earlier generations of older people in the United States, and as the nation’s elderly population grew during the course of the twentieth century (thanks to decreased child and infant mortality rates, improved nutrition, and increased availability of higher quality medical care), so too did these programs.

However, not all elderly people benefitted from the development of the senior state’s three core components of economic security, health security, and social service provisions. From its very beginnings, older white men in certain employment categories tended to be the greatest beneficiaries, despite the fact that older women (due to increased longevity and less participation in formal compensated employment) were generally in greater need of assistance in old-age. Along racial lines, whites tended to benefit far more than non-whites, given the significant disparities in life expectancies for white men and women versus, respectively, that of black men and women during much of the twentieth century.

The development of community and social services also helped to replicate and reinforce existing racial disparities in wealth into old-age. Wealthier, middle-class suburban communities in postwar America that could afford to support community and social programs for older residents benefitted from the significant expansion of the Older Americans Act in the late 1960s and into the early 1970s that directed tens of millions of new federal appropriations into these programs, frequently in the form of subsidies, but programs that served less wealthy rural and urban elderly populations were not always as fortunate. In New York City, the combination of a concentrated
elderly population and a local labor movement that was remained strong enough to organize and mobilize older people ensured that local government services for the elderly remained robust, but the same could not be said for less-fortunate cities like Detroit and St. Louis.

Consequently, as the senior state was developing, it attracted less unwelcome attention and organized political opposition than did other public assistance programs or initiatives. Compared to the racial polarized politics that ultimately doomed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), for example, the largely gradual, quiet expansion of government services to the elderly that marked the development of the senior state proceeded in a natural, organic manner that usually enjoyed the enthusiastic support of key players like state and local governments and private voluntary organizations that exercised significant power and influence within America’s widely dispersed system of government. If anything, the architects of the senior state took advantage of anti-welfare animus to build the case for enhanced government services for the elderly. The public and private pension crisis of the late 1940s helped fuel demands for changes to the Social Security system that ultimately shifted that system away from its originally more popular old-age noncontributory assistance program and towards its old-age contributory social insurance program. Other potentially worthy social initiatives for other age groups, such as proposed universal health care for infants and young children, were not enacted or were delayed for decades.11

11 For example, as both former Johnson senior assistant Joseph A. Califano and former Social Security Commissioner Robert M. Ball independently recalled, Medicare was merely the opening salvo in the long-standing fight to enact national health insurance. As Robert M. Ball remembered, “we all saw insurance for the elderly as a fallback position, which we advocated solely because it seemed to have the best chance politically…we expected Medicare to be the first step toward universal national health insurance, perhaps with ‘Kiddicare’ [federal insurance for children] as the next step.” Robert M. Ball, “Perspectives on Medicare: What Medicare’s Architects Had In Mind,” Health Affairs 14, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 62-72. Cited in Jonathan Oberlander, The Political Life of Medicare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 33. Likewise, in April and May 1968, economist Eveline Burns HEW Secretary Wilbur Cohen had unsuccessfully advanced the case for a comprehensive prenatal care program. See Alan Dickerson, Health Security For All: Dreams of Universal Health Care in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 135. See also Colin Gordon’s discussion in Dead on Arrival: The Politics of Health Care in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 108-109.
Essentially, in the forty years between the enactment of Social Security and the mid-1970s, the hopes and hard work of social reformers to build a public social welfare state in the United States that would modernize and humanize how the nation provided assistance and aid became increasingly channeled into the development of a lopsided welfare system that offered a modicum of protection against the vicissitudes of old age, but did so in a fragmented and incomplete manner. Driving this change was the need for the nation to provide at least some minimal measure of support and assistance to older people that would clearly mark that assistance as not a form of welfare or government handout, but which could also be reconciled with the nation’s historic reluctance to concentrate power in the national government or to engage in the public redistribution of wealth to support needy individuals or groups.

The senior state that took shape starting in the 1930s reflected this ambivalence by rationing assistance to older Americans along racial and gender lines in order to stave off the possibility of more radical or far-reaching reforms. Curious among government programs, Social Security enjoyed limited popular or elite support at the time of its inception; only the insistence of the Roosevelt administration and a mixture of congressional fear of the Townsend Movement and desire by southern Democrats for financial assistance supporting otherwise negligible southern state old-age assistance programs enabled the Social Security Act to clear otherwise unfavorable odds. The passage of the Social Security Act, and subsequent attempts to amend and expand it, generated fierce opposition from much but not all of the nation’s business community, which successfully sought to limit the expansion and improvement of the Social Security system throughout the 1940s.

This pause in the development of Social Security merely shifted the burden of providing old-age public assistance back to individual states and local communities, a development that virtually guaranteed continued inequality in the provision of that assistance. The growth of a private welfare state during the immediate post-World War II years and into the 1950s siphoned off a significant
amount of popular support for the continued expansion of the senior state by ensuring that an employment-centered model of social provision would continue to exist and compete with the social provision offered by the public welfare system. It was only when public methods to support older Americans once more entered into a crisis during the late 1940s and into the 1950s due to inadequate benefits paid by the old-age insurance system that public support for expanding the senior state at the national level became a pressing issue once more.

By this point, though, a growing body of academic literature as well as practical programmatic administrative experience by local and state officials had begun to redefine the economic and social problems associated with growing old in the United States. Popularized by Michael Harrington and other social commentators, this new orientation in public assistance for older people insisted upon a more multi-dimensional conception of the lived experience of elderly people in the United States that could not be solved simply by improving access to sufficient income in retirement (though that continued to be a goal for social reformers throughout this period).

Instead, this new, growing body of social science research emphasized the need for improved medical care and nutrition by arguing that the effects of biological aging could be arrested under the right circumstances, thereby enabling older people to remain active participants in the workforce, and by extension, lessening the need for them to become economically dependent upon public assistance. The steadily increasing overall population of older people in the United States, as well as the fact that older people were a proportionately rising portion of the overall general population, spurred popular and elite fears that the elderly would become a permanently expensive burden upon limited state and local welfare resources that would limit or prevent public assistance from being directed to other deserving recipients.12

12 In 1920, the proportion of people aged 65 years or older stood at 4.7% of the overall U.S. population. By 1970, this figure had more than doubled and stood at 9.9% of the overall U.S. population. Source: U.S. Census Bureau,
Therefore, starting in the 1940s and gradually picking up speed in the subsequent two decades, reformers and old-age advocacy groups pushed for the enactment of new government programs designed to assist older people in living active, independent lives, rather than easing them out of the workforce and thereby rendering them dependent upon either public or private assistance. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, a distinctive social policy network of local, state, and federal officials had emerged that aimed to use state power and resources to build a comprehensive welfare state for older people. The enactment of Medicare/Medicaid in 1965 and subsequent amendments to Social Security throughout the 1960s further bolstered the senior state.

This state-building process reached its culmination during the War on Poverty in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s as the Nixon administration ratified and expanded initiatives begun by the Johnson administration to combat elderly poverty. The senior state thereby brought together social welfare officials at all levels of government, private voluntary organization representatives, and academic experts into a new, unified effort to build an infrastructure capable of dealing with the myriad needs of older people. The outpouring of national legislation, including Medicare, the Older Americans Act, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, during the 1960s to deal with these needs, along with subsequent legislative amendments to these laws, represented the culmination of these efforts. By the mid-1970s, the federal government had assumed a new, permanent role as an essential partner to state and local governments in supporting the nation’s growing elderly population, and that shift represented a reversal of traditional concerns about enlarging the reach of the national state’s power in American society.

In supplying federal assistance with minimal disruption to local and state autonomy, the senior state was able to win the support of traditionally wary local and state officials, and by demonstrating the ability of government to be a force for promoting improved economic and social security in old age, the senior state secured the crucial backing of New Deal and Great Society social reformers who remained eager to improve public assistance without encouraging increased individual dependence upon limited state resources. These two elements enabled the senior state to become an essential part of the day-to-day life of millions of older people and hundreds of communities in the United States, and to ward off subsequent attempts to repeal it. The creation and continued existence of the senior state during this period signified that public assistance for the elderly had become socially acceptable and politically legitimate in American society, especially when compared to the wide-scale popular resistance that had greeted earlier reform efforts in the twentieth century to institutionalize a permanent role for the American state in the provision of old age assistance.
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