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War on poverty Johnson's declaration

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President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty 50 years ago. The war continues as conservatives and liberals still debate over how to win it.

When the LBJ library was dedicated, President Johnson said he wanted it to be a spring board to the future. Among the displays inside is one dedicated to his hope for a future without poverty. That hope became a war campaign which the president launched 50 years ago during his first state of the union address.

"And this Administration today here and now declares unconditional war on poverty in America," said Johnson during the joint Session of Congress.

Time has faded this black and white image, but for David and Joan Saidel LBJ's challenge still rings loud and clear. The Maryland couple toured the museum Wednesday and agree now more than ever Johnson's call for team work must be remembered.

"I think we need to work from within, we are not, I don't feel we are the great country we once were, we need to bring ourselves back up to that standard," said Joan Saidel.

This week, the council of economic advisors for the Obama administration released a progress report on the war. According to the document, poverty has declined by more than a third in the U.S. since 1967; from 25 percent to 16 percent in 2012. Programs initiated by Johnson's battle cry are credited with pulling 27 million people out of poverty every year. Improvements made to social security, it's claimed, have lowered the poverty rate for people 65 and older from 35 percent in 1960 to just under 15 percent in 2012.

Reports and Museums can provide an opportunity to look back and see how far we have come, but the debate over how far we should go continues.

"We've spent trillions of dollars in the war on poverty and by some measures poverty won," said Charles DeVore, with the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

DeVore believes the nation should now follow the Texas economic model. Less regulation, and more education choices are the keys, he said, to winning the war.

"People forget how to work, what happens when you have so much Government largesse, with good intentions it's almost like muscle memory, you get up go to work every day, and eventually 2-3 years out of the workforce you forget, you forget what it is to work, and government continues to care for people," said DeVore.

But those on the Left have a much different opinion than those on the Right.

"These programs give a leg up," said Ann Beeson, with the Center for Public Policy Priorities.

Beeson said Texas, despite its economic growth, continues to leave people behind. Without the programs launched by LBJ, Beeson said, the current poverty rate would double. To address income inequality she supports a minimum wage hike.

"What we know is the vast majority of people who are poor are working people, these are working families. People who have more than one job, and yet because these jobs don't pay well, they still can't make ends meet. Those are the kinds of people who are helped out in the short term not the long term by important government safety net programs."

President Johnson, 50 years ago, told congress the war would not be short or easy. He warned while the richest nation on earth could afford to win it, he said we cannot afford to lose it. As the War on Poverty continues, some historians blame the escalation of the War in Vietnam for taking the focus and funding away from LBJ's hope for the future.

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