

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to share with my colleague a recent article by my good friend Richard Leone, the former President of the Century Foundation. In his article "The Unfinished War" Leone reminds us all that "by ignoring the poor we undermine the welfare of everyone in the 99 percent living from pay check to pay check." As Congress debates taxes, government investments, and countless other issues, I hope all of my colleagues will keep his sage words in mind.[From the Huffington Post, July 6, 2012]

### THE UNFINISHED WAR

Nearly 50 years ago President Lyndon Johnson rallied the nation in support of a "War on Poverty." It was a goal widely accepted as necessary and realistic. While total "victory" might not have been unachievable, the effort was embraced and pursued by many leaders of both parties. The Nixon administration, for example, played a key role in advancement of the earned income tax credit and Ronald Reagan reached an agreement with the then Democratic Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, to strengthen Social Security's finances for another generation (today, about half of the nation's elderly would fall below the poverty line without Social Security).

While Johnson's initiatives and subsequent policies didn't end poverty, they sure made a dent in it. Americans began the 1960s with 22.4 percent of the population living in poverty, but by the early 1970s that percentage had been cut in half. Not unconditional victory, but a major policy triumph nonetheless. Since that time the poverty rate has fluctuated between about 11 percent and 15 percent, reaching the upward proportion during the Reagan years and the lower end of the range during the administration of Bill Clinton. This may seem like a fairly narrow band --unless you're one of the millions who fall into poverty as the nation moves from the bottom of the range to the top. Right now, as we struggle to recover from the financial crisis of 2008-2009, the share of Americans living in poverty is back to levels not seen since 1993.

So is a renewal of the war against poverty in the offing? The current balance of political forces suggests that, rather than muster all the weapons we have to fight for the poor, many are willing to settle for uneasy neutrality. This is one "war of choice" we choose not to wage. Austerity is the watchword of the day defined somewhat differently but accepted by the mainstream of both parties as the bedrock of policy for the foreseeable future.

With lower expectations of growth projected for the next several years and continuing competitive pressures from abroad it is hard for most observers to see an optimistic scenario in which recovery accelerates to the point of leading to a new 1990s style period of prosperity. While this clearly sets limits on what is possible, it also opens up opportunities for those who wish to use the current difficulties as a lever to win arguments that are geared to their core

values. Deregulation, weakening of unions, and further cuts in taxes for the wealthy and corporate America are all part of an ideological agenda that seems practical only because of the shifts of political forces and the imperatives of the financial weakness. To be sure there will be resistance to cuts in education, reductions in infrastructure spending, the weakening of Medicaid, and other radical departures from previous policies. But the defenders of the social contract seem at a distinct disadvantage. And what is not present in the debate, indeed has become virtually invisible in the media, is the issue of poverty.

In fact, the United States has proven over several decades to be more tolerant of poverty and of homelessness and other associated ills than is the case in other industrialized countries. One can only conclude from the current reality that even discussing the issue of reducing poverty is a luxury. Like support for the arts, it is off the table during these difficult times. Workers have largely lost their past generous instincts about social programs after a generation of stagnant wages. Slightly further up the ladder, families who were until recently considered themselves solidly middle class now are scrambling to maintain their standard of living--and even their jobs.

Yet, the United States is still a wealthy country, by all measures among the wealthiest in the world. And it clearly has the resources to provide a decent standard of living for its workers and citizens, its children and elderly. Other countries do so without much fuss. We, on the other hand, have rationalized increasing concentrations of wealth and income as somehow producing results that will be better for everyone. At the same time, our expenditures on the things that might change the circumstances of average Americans are meager by international standards. Elementary and secondary education, an historical strength, is being squeezed by budgetary problems at the state and local level. College aid and support for public higher education is shrinking. And, retraining programs for those who have lost their jobs due to the globalization of manufacturing and markets are nowhere close to what is available, for example, within the European Union.

Overall, the United States has achieved levels of inequality not seen for generations and now ranks near the top among industrial nations in inequality. These are not trivial statistics for they reflect very different perceptions of what is important in the world of politics and government. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that those who can afford it pay for our campaigns and reap the rewards while average citizens, frustrated and angry, turn against their government because they don't see it helping them. Facts seem irrelevant; the U.S. has lower tax rates than almost all of the other industrialized countries and government employment has dropped sharply in the past few years, yet the explanation for hard times is that the government is taxing too much and spending too much. In this hostile environment it may be no wonder that new programs to help the poor get short shrift. In this Darwinian environment, we simply can't afford to help them.

It's past time to connect the dots and see that by ignoring the poor we undermine the welfare of everyone in the 99 percent living from pay check to pay check. We must revive our generous national nature. And more selfishly come to see that we might find ourselves in their shoes. It may be that the poor will always be with us, but that doesn't mean it's OK to ignore them.