

2022 May 22 HCR on LBJ's Great Society and some of my own War on Poverty experiences

Reading Heather Cox Richardson's thumbnail account of LBJ's Great Society and the War on Poverty brought back vivid memories of that period in my life.

After arriving fresh from Penn State in the summer of 1964 with our new Master's Degrees, driving across country in our Morris Minor convertible with our one-year-old son, our cat, and our prized antique eight-chair oak dining room table from Goodwill sticking up out of the bench rear seat and all of us covered in a big fishnet to keep the cat in; stopping in Las Vegas to borrow \$50 for gas from my recently-ex sister-in-law; and living for a time in the densely packed, low rent Chicano community of Pico Rivera . . . my wife and I moved a few miles north into a dilapidated, slightly higher rent apartment above Main Street shops in downtown Alhambra, which we could afford thanks to the job she had found as librarian in nearby Monterey Park and my temporary job driving a 20' bobtail flatbed making deliveries for Redwood Patio Products.

(A step up too from our incomes at Penn State where our checks as Teaching Assistants, she in Theater and me in English, were so low that we had to go to the monthly USDA Food Commodities dole to get by -- and where, by the way, the canned army surplus meat they provided was so bad neither we nor the cat would eat it.)

It was while we were living in Alhambra that our second son was born at the end of July 1965 (strangely enough, on the same day that his brother was born two years earlier). Twelve nights later the Watts Riots broke out. We could smell the smoke while we watched the events on TV and I could see it as I drove around LA delivering redwood planters.

In the fall I started my new job we had come across country for, as a Teaching Assistant in the English Department at UCLA while I worked toward a second Master's (they didn't offer a doctorate) at the UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology.

At the end of the spring term I got a temporary job with the Office of Economic Opportunity's new "Summer Crash Program." My job, hastily assembled in part to, hopefully, avert a replay of Watts, was titled, with little content and much rhetoric aforethought, Cultural Enrichment Director for Anaheim, a town I'd never set foot in before.

Having been given no direction on what cultural enrichment was supposed to mean or what we were actually supposed to do, my fellow government employees and I tried to cobble together a number of activities that would somehow benefit the low income neighborhoods of the Anaheim area and, very important, keep the kids occupied and off the streets for the summer.

We finally decided that the most effective (expedient) cultural (or cross- or, a term seldom heard in those days, multi-cultural) enrichment we could accomplish was to organize the kids into baseball teams that would channel into relatively peaceful competition the more or less incendiary relations between Black and Brown neighborhoods.

The outstanding event of my directorship occurred one day when at a classroom-type gathering in

one of the barrio neighborhoods where we were discussing Mexican folk arts, a half-dozen or so young men dressed in dashikis with rifles on their shoulders opened the door at the rear of the room, marched in tight formation to the front where I sat at a table. Led by a man I later learned was Ron Karenga, the squad pivoted smartly to face the kids, stood there silently for several minutes, then on signal marched back out without closing the door behind them.

A few weeks later I was relieved from my job after some of the parents at an evening beach party organized by another Anglo OEO employee for part of the Hispanic community complained that I had been seen smoking marijuana with some of their kids (a newfound pleasure I had first enjoyed a few months earlier on a visit to Hollywood's Sunset Strip thanks to a fellow grad student).

By fall, we had moved south to Orange County (home of the Birch Society) where I was about to start my new job as instructor in English at Chapman College, best described, as it's students later told (or warned) me as "a small Christian College for small Christians." But that's another story.

As is now well known, much of Johnson's Economic Opportunity anti-poverty program (save for the Food Stamp program) had little more success than I did in trying to culturally enrich Anaheim. But as Heather Cox Richardson explains in the link below, other parts of his Great Society effort to expand the benefits of democracy were very successful. These included, among the eighty-four laws enacted under his impetus, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and a year later the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, the Social Security Act (medicare), the Clean Water Act and, perhaps the centerpiece, the Voting Rights Act.

All of which are now under serious assault by a Q-Anon-addled GOP (GQP) that wants to erase any trace of democratic (small and uppercase d) equality and return us in a time of climate catastrophe, pandemic and billionaires run amok to a pre-sixties and pre-Depression dystopia of white nationalist privilege, police state insecurity, strangelove military economy and robber baron oligarchy.

https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/may-21-2022?r=4v2bg&s=r&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email