COMMENTARY

Charles Murray's essay, "The War on Poverty: 1965–1980," [*WQ*, Autumn 1984] stirred considerable comment in the press and among scholars, as did *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980* (Basic, 1984), the book from which the essay was drawn. Here we publish a sampling of letters challenging Mr. Murray's critique—and Mr. Murray's reply. All have been slightly abridged for reasons of space.

Sargent Shriver, first director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (1964–68) and later the 1972 Democratic vice presidential candidate. Washington, D.C.:

Charles Murray managed to write a 39-page article on the War on Poverty without even mentioning its principal programs, many of which continue today under Reagan's administration! Not a word about Head Start, or the Job Corps, or Upward Bound, or Foster Grandparents, or VISTA, or Legal Services, or Community Action, etc. Instead, Murray devotes most of his attention to large entitlement programs, which grew exponentially under the Nixon administration after the War on Poverty had been guillotined.

None of the programs Murray condemns was created by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the agency that Richard Nixon demolished in his effort to terminate the War on Poverty. And although Nixon was successful in emasculating the War on Poverty by eliminating OEO, the headquarters for that war, most of OEO's "hand-up" programs continue, even though seriously reduced in effectiveness.

Harassment of War on Poverty programs never seems to stop, but the historical facts remain: Poverty decreased when the OEO was fully operational and has increased ever since its leadership was destroyed.

●

Adam Yarmolinsky, deputy director of the Anti-Poverty Task Force for the Office of Economic Opportunity (1964) and now a Washington, D.C., lawyer:

Charles Murray puts his finger on a critical dilemma of a humane welfare system: how to provide a minimally decent standard of living for those who cannot find ways to support themselves (and their children) while maintaining some margin of material reward for those who do contribute the sweat of their brows.

But having gone so far, he turns back and would have us pay less (we are doing that already), accomplish more (he doesn't say how), and "acknowledge" that "some" (mostly children, since he would not deny aid to the old or the sick) would go unhelped. Clearly, some features of existing antipoverty programs tend to discourage their beneficiaries from seeking productive roles in society, while they encourage various forms of social pathology. But the alternative to these programs is not a return to social Darwinism. Murray overlooks the lessons of the relatively successful European antipoverty programs, which have succeeded not by scrapping welfare benefits but by broadening them.

Murray also overlooks an even more basic dilemma: the increasing shortage of jobs—even dead-end jobs—for new entrants into the labor market. It is hard to interest young people in jobs that aren't there.

With regret, I add the observation that the value of Murray's argument is diminished by his apparent acceptance of the Moral Majoritarian cant about guilt-ridden liberals who blame the system, coddle criminals, and crown welfare queens.

●

Professor Frank Levy, School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland, College Park:

Charles Murray has written a provocative critique of American antipoverty policy, but in his effort to construct a convincing argument, he has mislaid half the facts. The result resembles a devastating review of a piano recital that neglects to mention that 10 minutes before curtain, a stagehand smashed the pianist's fingers in a door.

Mr. Murray's argument rests on three points: (1) Economic opportunity has expanded continuously in the postwar period. (2) Since the late 1960s, misguided policies have permitted welfare benefits to expand even faster than economic opportunity. (3) The result has been to draw more people into dependence. It is the first point that is wrong.

Economic opportunity did expand continuously from 1947 to 1973, and during this period, real (inflation-adjusted) wages and family incomes rose throughout the economy. Since 1973, the economy has been in a quiet depression in which neither real wages nor family incomes have grown. It used to be that a man passing from age 40 to age 50 could expect a 35 percent increase in *real* earnings. Today, a 50-year-old man would be lucky if his wages had kept pace with inflation since 1975. Wage stagnation, more than any other factor, has kept poverty rates high.

Mr. Murray is apparently unaware of this stagnation. In his article, the poor performance of the 1970s economy receives no mention. In his other writings, he suggests that the 1970s economy was as robust as the 1950s economy (when poverty rates fell substantially) since the gross national product (GNP) per person grew at similar rates in both decades. The comparison is naive.

During the 1950s, the labor force stood constant at 39 percent of the population. Rising GNP per *person* reflected rising GNP per *worker*, which was translated into rising real wages. A wage earner could see steady progress vis-à-vis the poverty line.

Over the last 10 years, GNP per *worker* has not grown, and the rise in GNP per *person* has occurred because the proportion of the population at work grew from 40 percent in 1970 to 48 percent by the end of the decade. The growth of this ratio reflected three factors—the Baby-Boom generation's coming of age, that generation's decision to postpone having their own children, and the influx of women into the labor force. While the first of these factors was exogenous, the last two were strategies for people to maintain growing consumption in the face of stagnant wages. But neither strategy was available to a poor female household head whose children were already born. In this context, welfare-state benefits became more attractive vis-à-vis work.

This wage stagnation had several causes: the OPEC price increases of 1973–74 and 1979–80, and the post-1973 collapse of industrial productivity growth, which remains largely unexplained.

The quiet depression of the 1970s now appears to be ending. If the economy returns to its normal pattern of real-wage growth, then Mr. Murray's interpretation of events may receive the test it deserves.

•

Robert B. Hill, senior research associate, Bureau of Social Science Research, Washington, D.C.:

Charles Murray attempts to explain a "paradox": why the rate of poverty failed to decline and even rose at the same time that government expenditures on the poor were soaring to unprecedented heights. His basic contention is that the War on Poverty was primarily responsible for inducing rises in poverty during the 1970s. According to Murray, small groups from the liberal intelligentsia persuaded the Congress, the Executive Office, and the courts to expand sharply economic benefits to the undeserving poor in accordance with the "new wisdom" of "blaming the system"—although the overwhelming majority of Americans continued to believe the "old wisdom" of "blaming the victim."

Murray's analysis suffers from several important flaws.

First, the relation between rising government spending and rising poverty is perceived by Murray to be a paradox because he adopts uncritically a premise that reverses cause and effect. Since Murray accepts as an axiom the conventional wisdom that economic deprivation did not increase significantly during the '70s, he conducts no analyses to test the hypothesis that rising unemployment and poverty may have been *partly* responsible for increasing expenditures for the jobless and poor over that decade.

Second, Mr. Murray's analysis deemphasizes the role of recession and inflation. But he is not alone in this stance,