

# A Decade that Changed History

It was a textbook example of how awareness leads to action — and how a group of dedicated activists and leaders can change history and dramatically improve people’s lives.

From 1967 through 1977, these leaders set in motion a series of events that combined to shock Americans’ consciences about the existence of hunger in the midst of plenty, to then revolutionize federal food and nutrition policy, and finally, to dramatically reduce hunger in our nation.

Hunger was not a new problem in the 1960s. Those at the bottom of America’s economic ladder have always had trouble feeding their families, and this problem had become particularly acute during the Great Depression.

However, after the post-World War II decades of robust growth in America’s economy, Americans’ consciousness of hunger faded. Even after the launch of President Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty,” hunger was not on the radar screen and many people simply did not know that millions of their fellow citizens continued to suffer from levels of hunger and malnutrition that in some cases were comparable to those in the developing world.

At the time, the primary federal tool for fighting hunger was the surplus commodities program, which made cheese, powdered milk, peanut butter and flour available to the poor. Food stamps were in their infancy, a pilot program available only in some counties and then only with a copayment (the “purchase requirement”) which few poor people could afford. There was even a charge to be paid by people with no income at all.

## **Bearing Witness**

It was in this context that the first precipitating event occurred. In 1967, the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, chaired by Sen. Joseph Clark (D-PA) was

holding a hearing in Mississippi on reauthorizing the War on Poverty. Clark and several colleagues, including Sens. Robert F. Kennedy (D-NY) and Jacob Javits (R-NY), were startled by the testimony of young civil rights attorney Marian Wright, who, instead of emphasizing the poverty program, talked about the near-starvation she was seeing in the state.

Having heard this, Clark and Kennedy decided to change their itinerary to see things firsthand. Accompanied by Kennedy’s aide, Peter Edelman, and Wright (who were later married), they went the next day to visit families living in shacks with no food in the pantry and severely malnourished children with distended bellies.

Kennedy was deeply moved and remarked to Peter Edelman and others that he had seen such conditions only in Third World countries. He returned to Washington determined to follow up.

This experience had a profound impact not only on Kennedy, but on millions of Americans, since what he saw was seen by the entire nation that evening thanks to the coverage provided by then-CBS correspondent **Daniel Schorr**.

In Washington, Clark and Kennedy confronted Johnson administration officials. Agriculture Secretary Orville Freeman did agree to eliminate the food stamp charge for families with no income. But the Administration’s response became more and more defensive. At that point, the White House’s top priority was the war in Vietnam; its commitment to domestic anti-poverty efforts was fading. Anti-hunger forces also encountered openly hostile opposition from too many legislators, particularly two long-tenured senators from Mississippi.

Clark, Kennedy and Javits kept plugging away. They held additional hearings and their findings were reinforced by a Field Foundation study which reported that Mississippi children were “living under such primitive conditions that we found it hard to believe we were examining American children in the 20th century.”

Their efforts bore some further fruit in November 1967, as Congress passed an emergency food aid bill, although the Johnson administration failed to implement it for five more long months.

### **A Year of Hope and Tragedy**

The momentum for action to stop hunger continued to build in 1968. CBS News aired the landmark documentary “Hunger in America” on national television in prime time, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., launched the Poor People’s Campaign, and Robert F. Kennedy made the fight against hunger and poverty a pillar of his campaign for president. But then disaster struck with the assassinations of Dr. King in April, and Senator Kennedy two months later.

As devastating as these tragedies were, the anti-poverty and anti-hunger movement pressed on. The Poor People’s Campaign came to Washington in the spring and summer of 1968 demanding action. Assistant Attorney General **Roger Wilkins** found himself in the key position of consulting with Wright and other campaign organizers at night, and then working during the day to persuade the Johnson administration to adopt their proposals — in particular, the idea of providing free food stamp benefits to anyone earning a dollar a day or less.

It was a struggle, but eventually, President Johnson agreed to support the plan. However, it was blocked by some powerful committee chairs in Congress. In November of that year, Richard Nixon was elected president, and Clark was defeated in his reelection campaign.

### **New Movement for Change**

Anti-hunger leaders kept pressing forward. Their tenacity led to the 1969 White House Conference on Hunger, in which President Nixon called for an end to hunger in America. While the Conference had points of controversy, it did produce a list of important policy recommendations, many of which, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), eventually made their way into law. Equally important, it kept the issue of hunger high in the public’s consciousness.

More significantly, that same year, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs was established, chaired by Sen. **George McGovern** (D-SD). McGovern already had long been a champion of efforts to meet basic human needs in the U.S. and abroad. The Select Committee became the key force in the effort to keep hunger at the top of the public agenda and to overcome turf battles that had emerged between various committees that shared jurisdiction over nutrition and anti-poverty policy. For years to come, the Select Committee would be the fulcrum for key anti-hunger efforts.

McGovern had served as the first director of the Food for Peace Program under President John F. Kennedy, and he combined a deep personal commitment to social justice with an understanding of the needs of America’s farmers. Appointed to the committee were members from the Senate Labor and Agriculture Committees, and its make-up brought together senators from farm-producing states and from urban states affected by poverty, creating the first sparks of the bipartisan producer-consumer coalition that would be essential to federal nutrition policy for many years to come. Committee members included Javits, the ranking Republican, Walter Mondale (D-MN), Charles Percy (R-IL), Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) and Robert Dole (R-KS).

McGovern also made a point of hiring an extraordinary group of staff, including Bill Smith, Nancy Amidei (who later became director of FRAC), Kenneth Schlossberg, Gerald Cassidy, Jack Quinn, Robert Shrum, and Alan Stone and Marshall Matz (both of whom serve on FRAC’s board today).

### **Building Pressure for Action**

While McGovern and his colleagues were doing this vital work, an important development was taking place outside of government. Recognizing that ending hunger required a broad panoply of strategies — including an independent organization to mobilize support, serve as a watchdog, prod agencies, provide reliable research, and ensure that nutrition programs are properly implemented — Ron Pollack founded the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) in 1970.

FRAC immediately had an impact in the states, in Congress, at USDA, and in the courts. For example, FRAC quickly launched litigation in 26 states that ultimately led to a requirement that every state must operate either a food stamp program or a commodity distribution program in all counties.

### **Changing Policy for the Better**

In 1970 and 1971 Senator McGovern's Committee moved from gathering facts to advocating solutions. While it did not have bill-passing authority, any time there was a consensus among members, those who also served on the Agriculture or Labor Committees took the initiative to introduce key legislation and spearhead the fight for passage, supported from the outside by FRAC and other anti-hunger advocates.

The results speak for themselves. In just the first few years the nation saw:

- The creation of WIC in 1972, providing food assistance, nutrition education and support in accessing health care to poor women, new mothers and at-risk infants and children — perhaps the single most cost-effective anti-hunger initiative ever devised. Unfortunately, the Nixon administration unlawfully impounded WIC funds. It took litigation by FRAC to force WIC's full implementation.
- Expansion of the Food Stamp Program from a pilot program to a nationwide entitlement in 1974, followed by enactment of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, which eliminated entirely the self-defeating purchase requirement, gave the program its current structure and strengthened its ability to serve families across America.
- Transforming the School Breakfast Program from a pilot program into a nationwide entitlement in 1975.

Within a few years of enactment of this flurry of legislation, the breadth and depth of hunger and malnutrition rapidly declined, especially in poor rural areas, like those Kennedy visited in 1967.

In 1977 the Field Foundation again sent a team of doctors to some of the poorest areas of the country. They reported: "Our first and overwhelming impression is that there are far fewer grossly malnourished people in this country today than there were ten years ago. Malnutrition has become a subtler problem...Even in areas which did not command national attention ten years ago, many poor people now have food."

The panel found that this improvement resulted not from an overall improvement in living standards but from The Food Stamp Program, the nutrition aspects of Head Start, school lunch and breakfast programs, and WIC.

The broad structure of the federal government's anti-hunger policy was now in place. While there have been many ups and downs since then in the fight against poverty and hunger, nutrition programs have largely maintained their broad, bipartisan support through thick and thin, and have grown and evolved to better meet the needs of America's low-income people.

For this, we can thank this evening's panelists — George McGovern, Daniel Schorr and Roger Wilkins — the founders of FRAC and dozens of other tireless, committed activists and leaders whose work, individually and collectively, changed forever America's response to one fundamental injustice.