Decades of not-so-benign neglect have allowed poverty to molder in America's cultural basement even as the bad news on poverty has been unremitting since 2008. The nation currently endures the highest rate of poverty since 1993, at 15.1 percent. Child poverty is particularly bad, at over 20 percent; and within the nation's African-American community, poverty has hit crisis levels, approaching percentages last seen in the late 1960s. Add in the near poor, people who are just above the poverty threshold, and the picture becomes even more depressing—and more accurate—knowing that almost 50 percent of the nation is in a daily struggle to get by.

Despite the gravity of the crisis, there is little enthusiasm in austerity-addled Washington for a redeclaration of the old war on poverty, though much has been said about income disparity and saving the nation's middle class. The church cannot be accused of remaining silent. The U.S. bishops and Catholic Charities USA have repeatedly spoken up for the least among us as the economy has soured.

The problem of poverty has been showing up with greater frequency in the U.S. media, but the issue has not been received by the public with the fervency aroused in past times of economic crisis. It may be that this era still awaits its Michael Harrington, Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange to bring the issue more vividly before the public conscience.

Combating poverty was a big issue in the 1960s and endured, at least as a talking point, into the 1970s, when deindustrialization ravaged the American working class. In the ensuing decades, however, poverty became the fault of the poverty-stricken, too lazy or drug- and alcohol-addicted to take personal responsibility and pull themselves up by those mythological bootstraps. Welfare reform and the boom time that began in the mid-90s knocked poverty off the front pages as the nation enjoyed record levels of job growth. Unemployment plummeted from more than 7 percent in 1993 to just 4 percent in November 2000.

Those better economic times may have contributed to the hardening of an ideological slogan into a cornerstone of contemporary received wisdom—that government programs "can't beat" poverty, and it is a waste of money even to try. But it should be recalled that President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty generated perhaps the greatest movement out of poverty in the nation's history, cutting the level of national poverty in half, from 22 percent in 1962 to just above 11 percent in 1973. The impact on the African-American community was also dramatic, reducing poverty from 55 percent in 1959 to 33 percent by 1970. And in our own time various measures taken by the federal government since the great collapse of 2008—like preserving Medicaid and S- chip, the payroll tax cut and extensions of unemployment payments—have saved millions from falling into a deep poverty from which they and their children might never have recovered.

It was refreshing to hear President Obama acknowledge America's poor and the biblical injunction to respond to their cry at the National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 2. And it is encouraging that poverty in the United States is once again making it above the fold in print and digital media. Can the renewed coverage shame enough people in power in both the public and private sectors to do more to respond to the nation's poverty crisis?

Americans may not be able to work up the cultural or fiscal energy for another effort on the scale of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, but more specific attention to the plight of the poor by maintaining social lifelines and redoubled efforts at job creation and retraining seem warranted. In 1986 President Reagan famously noted that the nation had declared war on poverty and "poverty won." But that is not exactly how it went, in fact. The nation enjoyed then, as it does now, a peace dividend generated by the War on Poverty that has prevented a return to the high levels of poverty last seen in the oft-presumed golden era of the 1950s. One thing is certain: defeat will always be a dependable outcome if U.S. policymakers surrender the field without firing a shot.