On January 8, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson delivered a State of the Union address to Congress in which he declared an “unconditional war on poverty in America.” Johnson’s goal was not only to “relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.” Since then, federal and state governments have spent more than $19 trillion fighting poverty. But what has really been accomplished?

In March, the Cato Institute held a special half-day conference at Columbia University, bringing together a wide range of experts. Panelists discussed whether the War on Poverty succeeded in its goals, what remains to be done, and whether private charitable efforts would be a better alternative to government welfare programs.

In his keynote address, John McWhorter discussed how to “radically change the degree and nature of poverty.” A linguist at Columbia University who frequently writes on race and cultural issues for the Manhattan Institute, McWhorter offered a number of solutions—from rethinking the way reading is taught to addressing the problem of single-parent homes—that would help alleviate the worst cases of impoverishment. But he emphasized in particular eliminating the war on drugs. Our failed attempt to combat drug use, he said, encourages violence. It destroys black families. It’s largely responsible for the country’s high incarceration rate. But perhaps most of all, high black-market prices make selling drugs a tempting alternative to stable employment. “The war on drugs discourages black men who have been dealt a bad hand by life from getting legal work,” McWhorter said. “It’s as simple as that.”

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, began by stressing just how expansive the War on Poverty is, noting that there are currently 126 different federal anti-poverty programs. Have they worked? The evidence suggests that, since the early years of the War on Poverty, the country successfully reduced many of the deprivations of material poverty. Yet, despite some initial success, the programs it spawned have long since reached a point of diminishing returns. “The War on Poverty has failed to make those living in poverty independent or increase economic mobility among the poor and children,” Tanner concluded. “We may have made the lives of the poor less uncomfortable, but we have failed to truly lift people out of poverty.”

Throughout the day, experts from across the political spectrum offered their varied perspectives. Robert Doar, a fellow in poverty studies at the American Enterprise Institute, discussed how civil society can help provide opportunities for the most vulnerable Americans. Angela Glover Blackwell, the founder and CEO of PolicyLink, focused on the complexities of intergenerational poverty. “We need to stop arguing and debating about whether we need to spend government dollars to help people get out of poverty,” she said. “We need to spend those dollars.”

What are the alternatives? Harriet Karr-McDonald spoke about the genesis and history of the Doe Fund, a private charity in New York, of which she is the cofounder and executive vice president. Since the mid-1980s, the Doe Fund has successfully helped the poor and disadvantaged without government involvement, providing tools and incentives to help the poor become self-sufficient. “We believed then as we do now that work is the solution to poverty,” she said. The charity’s centerpiece social entrepreneurial project, Ready, Willing & Able, is a meticulously structured yearlong roadmap to success that equips individuals for the long-term, providing them with “a hand up, not a handout,” according to Karr-McDonald. The Doe Fund exemplifies how private alternatives to government programs can empower individuals to lead independent, productive lives, thereby reducing poverty with extraordinary success.