

# Ambivalence: America's Historic Approach to Welfare Reform

Within his first few weeks in office President Clinton has begun to formulate a welfare proposal that calls for expansions in welfare benefits, but at the same time seeks to reduce the number of people receiving public aid long term. A look at the history of American welfare reform suggests that the President has in fact recycled many old solutions and been swept up in the conflicting whirl of American desires to both protect and punish the poor.

**Welfare Reform Today • The Rise of Poorhouses: Nineteenth Century Reform • Saving Children: The Movement of the Early 1900s • The Great Depression & Welfare Expansion • The War on Poverty: Reform during the 1960s • Nixon and Carter Attempt Fundamental Change • War on Welfare: Reform during the Reagan and Bush Era • Possibilities for Clinton**

By Alison Pion

## Welfare Reform Today

No one is comfortable with the idea of welfare. Critics say that the system is incoherent and inefficient. Many charge that welfare programs erode the American work ethic and lead to idleness and unproductivity. Low income people who are enmeshed in the system view it as a frustrating and humiliating experience. However, after over two centuries of complaints, the American welfare structure has still managed to resist fundamental change.

This year, President Clinton has pledged to make welfare reform a priority during his four year term. Although the budget sets no money aside for changes in welfare policy, the Administration has stated that it is committed to developing a substantive public relief reform initiative.

During both the campaign and the transition, Clinton called for a two year limit on non-regulated welfare benefits. After this time, welfare recipients would be required to accept public service employment and participate in a job training program in an effort to promote work. An intra-government task force on welfare is now being formed and is expected to submit a comprehensive proposal on welfare reform to the Administration within the year.

Although all of Clinton's welfare policy has not been

revealed, the pieces he has put forward lead one to wonder whether his assertion of reform truly can be heralded as fundamental change. Some welfare analysts have already voiced criticism about Clinton's plan.

In particular, critics charge that Clinton's two year limit is based on the incorrect premise that people who go on welfare stay on welfare. A recent study conducted by Harvard researchers Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood found that the majority of people remain on welfare for a period of less than one year. For the majority of families, welfare is a transitional means of support following some economic hardship, such as the loss of a partner or job or the birth of a baby.

However, supporters of Clinton's plan point out that long term welfare reciprocity still remains a significant problem. Approximately one in six recipients stays on public assistance for eight consecutive years or more. These long stays account for about 60 percent of total welfare costs.

Clinton's emphasis on promoting a work ethic through strict federal relief provisions situates him directly in a struggle that has plagued the American welfare system for over two centuries. Throughout its history, American welfare policy has been defined by conflicting purposes. On one hand, the image of America as a safe haven for the victimized has fostered a desire to help the poor, the sick, and the needy, through federal relief programs.

Alternatively, however, there exists a powerful American mind-set which celebrates independence and individual effort. America's worship of self-sufficiency has led to repulsion for those unable to "pull themselves up by their boot straps" and realize the American dream. Americans often accuse the poor of laziness and immorality and view those on welfare as failures.

These inconsistent beliefs have produced unresolved tensions in welfare legislation that have hindered all attempts to develop a coherent policy. In an effort to end dependency many leaders have tried to dismantle America's system of public assistance through lower benefit levels and strict eligibility requirements. In particular, those receiving the majority of disdain have been the able-bodied poor—those who are poor but deemed employable. However, America's sense of itself as protector has

## WORD WATCH

The word "welfare"—understood to mean public assistance or, more technically, "means tested relief" (i.e. if the means available to an individual exceed a certain level, then relief is not given)—is a relatively modern term which only became commonly accepted in the second decade of the twentieth century. Initially, "welfare" was used in a positive manner to differentiate older relief practices from newer, more adequate ones. It is unclear when it acquired the negative connotations attached to the term today.

resulted in the enactment of conflicting legislation that has expanded eligibility requirements and increased benefit provisions. Both out of concern and as a result of suspicion, welfare reform has been used to try to establish social order and control the labor patterns of the poor. America's incompatible purposes regarding welfare have resulted in contradictions between policies of deterrence, compassion, control, and patronage.

### The Rise of Poorhouses: Nineteenth Century Reform

The 1850s marked the first significant governmental reform in the American welfare system with the emergence of public institutional programs known as poorhouses or almshouses. Prior to this time, public relief was neither systematic nor structurally sound, generally run through local, parish or neighborhood organizations. Concern that poor people were becoming too dependent on the old system of local public assistance lead taxpayers to encourage the government to push state and local communities to establish poorhouses. These efforts were motivated less by a philanthropic desire than by the wish to discourage low income families from asking for poor relief.

The poorhouse system was designed to control low income people's behavior by suppressing intemperance and indoctrinating them with the habit of steady work. Within the poorhouses there was no separation by age, sex, or condition. Poorhouses were viewed as "human dumping grounds." Delinquents were thrown in with the insane and those whose only crimes was to request public assistance. The work ethic was taught to those in the poorhouses through meaningless, systematic labor tasks. For instance, in a Providence, Rhode Island almshouse inmates were instructed to carry wood from one side of the room to the other, all day long, in an effort to keep them busy.

In 1875, legislation ordered children out of the poorhouses. While this law was in part developed to protect children from the squalors of the poorhouse, institutional relief now meant breaking up families and sending children to orphan asylums. Many felt poor parents could not do a good job of raising their own families. In order to reverse the legacy of poverty and dependence, taxpayers believed children needed to be taken from their families and taught "better" values.

As a result of these policies, the poorhouse became a place for poor parents to avoid at all cost. In this manner, taxpayers and government officials were able to mount an attack against those receiving public assistance and ensure that those who might be able to work did not turn to public relief. This deliberate attempt to define, locate, punish, and purge the able-bodied poor from welfare was to resurface time and again in welfare reform policy.

### Saving Children: The Movement of the Early 1900s

In the 1890s welfare reform developed two converging courses.

Policy became increasingly concerned with improving the "immoral" behavior of the poor. At the same time, saving the children emerged as a preeminent theme of reformers—an idea which resurfaces in contemporary times through Clinton's "investment in the future through the children of today."

In contrast to previous welfare policies which advocated the separation of poor children from their families, preservation of the family unit became the guiding force of early twentieth century welfare reform. Nineteen hundred and nine was the year of the first White House Conference on Children. Soon after, legislation was enacted which offered women with children, who were below a certain income bracket, benefits through the government's "mother's pensions" program. By 1931 over 200,000 children in every state, except Georgia and South Carolina, lived in homes supported by mother's pensions. Most of these pensions went to widows.

Saving the children and attacking immorality did not, however, mean simply offering public relief to low income people without strings attached. Welfare policy was also used to deliberately reinforce certain values. For instance, Illinois legislation

of 1913 mandated that divorced women were ineligible for mother's pensions. Again in the late 1940s, attempts were made to reduce illegitimate births among black women through the implementation of stricter "suitable home" provisions in state Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) regulations. By using a specific, narrow definition for what constituted a "suitable" home and could, therefore, qualify for aid, federal public assistance was used to establish a certain social order and define the standards for a "deserving" mother.

### Trends in Welfare Reform Over the Last Two Centuries:

1800s	Reliance on Local Public Relief
1850s	Establishment of Poorhouses
1890s	Enactment of "Save the Children" Legislation
1930s	Creation of First Federal Relief System, Development of Federal Work Programs
1960s	War on Poverty, Emphasis on Systemic Obstacles and Opportunity
1970s	Movement to Simplify System of Relief
1980s	War on Welfare
1990s	Investment in the People

### The Great Depression and Welfare Expansion

The Depression that began in 1893 and exploded during the late 1920s and mid-1930s exposed the inadequacy of contemporary welfare ideas and institutions. Until the Great Depression, states and local communities, not the federal government, had provided direct relief to the poor. However, with official unemployment rates increasing from 3.2 percent in 1929 to 24.9 percent by the summer of 1933, the need for assistance was more than either state or local community budgets had the capacity to handle.

Within the first 100 days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) term as president (1933-1945) he created the nation's first federal relief system, Aid for Dependent Children. However, Roosevelt was reluctant to provide direct cash assistance to the poor. Instead, Roosevelt favored work relief programs such as Public Works Administration, and later the Works Progress Administration, which provided training and jobs to the able-bodied poor in an effort to keep them off welfare. Though FDR's vision of welfare deviated from previous reform efforts, the new system of public assistance did little to challenge the categories of able-bodied versus needy.

### The War on Poverty: Reform During the 1960s

Welfare reform once again shifted its scope and focus during the 1960s. Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and renewed optimism in the American dream, the need to improve poor peoples' opportunities became the central focus of welfare reform. However, consistent with America's historic dislike of welfare, much of the discussion emphasized the need to fight against poverty by improving opportunities for poor people through education and equal rights and paid little attention to the welfare system itself.

The War on Poverty, begun during the presidency of John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) and continued through Lyndon B. Johnson's time in office (1963-1968), launched new community development programs, job training programs, and various education programs such as Head Start. These programs marked a significant shift in the focus of welfare. Instead of blaming or attacking the individual for his or her failure to succeed, the new thinking now stressed that the economic system was not working as it should. Structural problems and obstacles barred the way to success. The war was now to be fought against artificial and unjustifiable barriers that hindered the open, competitive structure of American capitalism.

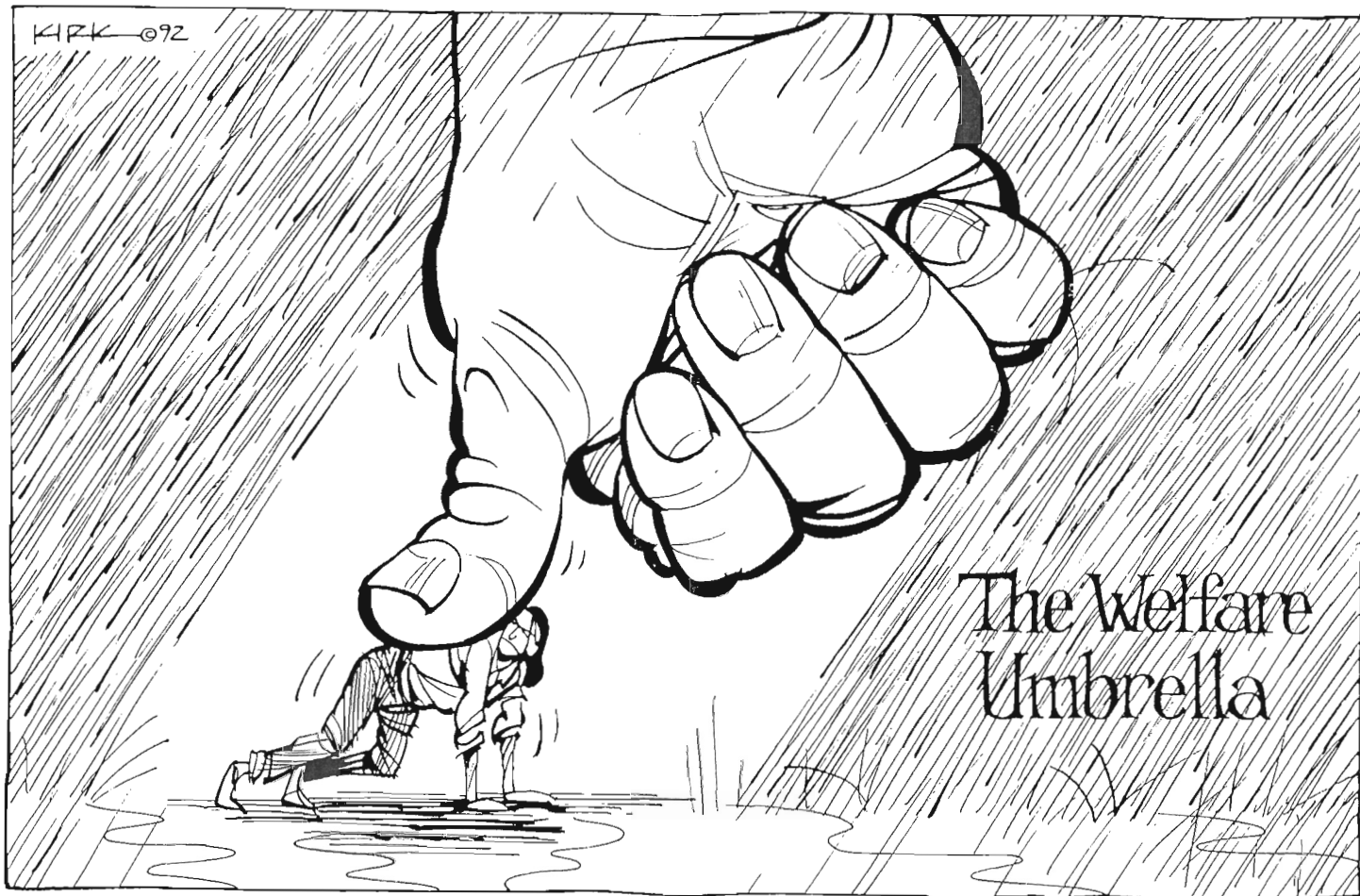
Kennedy's and Johnson's poverty programs had largely bypassed the welfare system, substituting other programs in its place. However, by the mid-1960s the government did expand Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits and

challenged some of the ways in which the welfare system treated recipients. In particular, they contested midnight raids to see if single mothers on welfare had men in their homes and regulations that denied aid to single mothers deemed employable by the welfare office.

However, the relaxation of welfare regulations and the expansion of eligibility requirements ultimately reignited old fears. People were caught between wanting to help the poor and their concern that public assistance destroyed the desire to work. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the welfare system was increasingly criticized for undermining the work ethic among recipients.

This atmosphere led to the development of legislation in 1967 that built work incentive benefits into the AFDC structure and established the Work Incentive Program (WIN). Like previous welfare reform policies, this legislation tried to use both rewards and penalties to encourage those receiving welfare to work. For the first time, recipients were allowed to increase their incomes above states' need standards and still remain on welfare.

WIN also used penalties to encourage work. WIN legislation mandated that states require "appropriate" members of AFDC families, including mothers, to participate in work or training programs to the extent that space was available. Refusal to participate in these programs could mean a reduction in AFDC benefit levels. In 1971, Congress passed legislation which required all mothers on welfare with no pre-school children to



*Historic American ambivalence— punishing while protecting.*  
[Kirk Anderson]

participate.

WIN, however, was not as effective as it could have been. Congress failed to appropriate enough funding to enable WIN requirements to be applied to more than a modest portion of eligible AFDC mothers. At its peak, WIN rarely served more than one third of those required to enroll.

### **Nixon and Carter Attempt Fundamental Change**

In 1969, Richard Nixon attempted to restructure social welfare more fundamentally than any previous president since FDR. Nixon proposed to simplify public assistance and construct a system that awarded work by establishing a minimum benefit level for poor families across all states. The program, called the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), was to replace AFDC, food stamps, and several other social welfare programs with a refundable income tax for poor families.

However, FAP failed to win Congressional approval as a result of political difficulties. Conservative southern legislators were concerned that FAP's benefit levels, more generous than what their states offered now, would threaten their regions' low wage structure and increase black political power. As well, welfare advocacy groups, such as the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), opposed FAP because it lowered recipient benefit levels in some of the higher benefit level northern states.

FAP's unpopularity was also the result of Nixon's refusal to make FAP benefits contingent on the willingness of welfare recipients to work. FAP brought all government help organizations, and therefore all individuals supported by them, under one roof. It threatened the distinction between public assistance—special aid to those who could not help themselves—and social insurance—those benefits such as Social Security and Medicaid which are considered a right for all citizens. Moreover, by refusing to differentiate between the able-bodied and needy poor, FAP further violated the foundations upon which the American welfare system had been established.

President Jimmy Carter shared Nixon's desire to simplify the welfare system and increase benefit levels in low benefit level states. In 1977, Carter proposed a welfare reform package, the Program for Better Jobs and Income (PBJI), which greatly resembled Nixon's FAP. PBJI combined several direct cash assistance programs for the poor, including AFDC and food stamps, into a single cash payment and established a national minimum benefit. However, like FAP, Carter's plan failed to win Congressional approval as a result of similar political conflicts.

Thus, despite Presidential attempts to reform the welfare system during the late 1960s and 1970s, only minor changes in the system occurred. However, with the election of President Reagan during the 1980s a new era in welfare reform began. The Reagan administration sought to make unprecedented reductions in welfare programs for low income families.

### **War on Welfare: Reform during the Reagan and Bush Era**

During President Reagan's 1986 State of the Union address, he charged the welfare system with being wasteful, destroying the American work ethic, and fostering dependency. Soon after, Reagan pushed through Congress an administration package which cut federal support for many social programs, including AFDC, Medicaid, food stamps, school lunch, and Social Security. Whereas previous efforts to push people off welfare had

often been limited to those considered able-bodied and had been accompanied by work incentive benefits, Reagan's policies had none of these features.

Although Reagan's attempts to cut social security received strong opposition from most recipients, he did manage to cut social security to the disabled—a group often protected in the past—as a result of their inability to galvanize extensive resistance. As well, Reagan's welfare policies had little financial incentives for welfare mothers to engage in part-time work, which had been considered the norm for mothers with young children.

Reagan's welfare reform was an aggressive act, not only against the able-bodied on welfare, but against the welfare system itself and all recipients of public assistance; a welfare policy reminiscent only of the poorhouse era.

With the election of George Bush in 1988, the attack on welfare eased slightly. Disagreements remained within the Administration over whether work requirements were appropriate, especially with regard to mothers with young children. As well, there was reluctance to raise the low benefit levels which continued to exist in some states.

However, the Family Support Act, which passed in 1988, mandated that single mothers with no children under three must participate in training and job programs. Much of the proposal left responsibility for determining benefit levels and offering families needed services up to individual states and localities.

### **Possibilities for Clinton**

Having examined the trends in welfare policy, it is apparent that America's newest president is caught in an ancient battle of welfare reform with only the assistance of old solutions. Clinton's proposal to expand federal aid reverses a trend begun by Reagan and continued by Bush and, instead, follows the examples of welfare policy developed during the time of FDR and expanded until the early 1980s.

In addition, Clinton's emphasis on job training appears to follow a long line of similar reform policy that has seen retraining as a viable solution for helping welfare recipients to escape dependency. However, Clinton's call for a two year limit on welfare benefits seems reminiscent of Reagan's welfare policies that were interested only in cutting the numbers of eligible welfare recipients regardless of need or circumstance.

Overall, Clinton's stance reflects the same ambivalence towards the poor that has characterized the history of American welfare reform; a history shaped by Americans' conflicting desires to help the poor while, at the same time, to punish them for their dependency.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

- Gordon Berlin, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families, and Our Economic Future*. (Ford Foundation, February 1988).
- David Ellwood, *Poor Support*. (Basic Books, Inc., 1988).
- Judith Gueron, *Reforming Welfare With Work*. (Ford Foundations, 1987).
- Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poor House*. (Basic Books, Inc., 1986).
- Paul Sommers, ed., *Welfare Reform in America*. (Kluwer & Nyhoff, 1982).