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Fulfilling Fears and Fantasies: The Role of Welfare in Right-Wing Social Thought and Strategy

Ann Withorn

I presently work three jobs to make ends meet. Or perhaps I should say four since mothering is more than a full-time job in itself. I have been on and off welfare for years because I can never make enough money and/or be there for my children in the ways they need.

I work as a crossing guard for the police. I work cleaning houses and as a visiting nurse. These are all potentially well-paying jobs but the work is not always steady and I am paid per job. . . . I have never sold myself or drugs. I have never stayed at home and watched TV and never eaten bon bons. . . .

No one should have to choose between providing for the financial or emotional survival of their family. And yet we have to. And you and the rest of government is responsible for this impossible situation.

Stop bashing mothers. Stop bashing welfare recipients. Stop all these punishing changes that will only make a bad situation worse. We have a right to survive.

—Ellen Green, testifying before the Massachusetts Legislature, 1995¹

Although opposition to "welfare" has only rarely been a primary focus of the Right in the United States, it has often been an implicit unifying point, a place where the circles of ideological interest intersect. Almost every right-winger gets deeply satisfying rewards from being against the friendless welfare state. Racists can tell stories about ne'er-do-well blacks. Libertarians can expose the brutality of a behemoth state. Radical capitalists can show the dire costs of interfering with a free market, whereas Christian moralists can rant passionately about welfare's permissiveness regarding women's promiscuity and family "breakdown."

Historically, the role of antiwelfare argument as a linchpin among right-wing forces was not obvious. But especially over the past decade, we began to see preachers, pundits, politicians from both parties, researchers, and respondents to national polls all being quoted in ways that were even picked up in the rambling justifications of a murderer of Mass-

achusetts abortion clinic workers: Welfare is the epitome of all that is destroying American society—it must be stopped because it undermines the good people and rewards the bad.² With the successful 1996 passage of national "welfare reform," grown directly from the most conservative roots imaginable, the congruence has become screamingly visible. Today, opposition to welfare has successfully become not only a unifier for the Right but a wedge issue for infusing right-wing ideology into mainstream social policy and social thought.

This chapter reviews how "welfare" has served as a historic source of fear and fantasy for the varied right-wing views of the world and examines its role in supplying an ever more common enemy, and a shared vision, for today's successful fusion of disparate conservative forces.³

It is important to state that this chapter is built upon an assumption that one of the historically basic and proper divisions between Left and Right in the United States has been over the willingness to provide public resources to those in need (welfare) but that this division has been obscured because liberals and even leftists have consciously glossed over their structural intentions in order to avoid presumed public opposition. Advocates of an American welfare state knowingly sold Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with false claims that it would be temporary, and proclaimed a "War on Poverty" that they knew could not be won in capitalist America, for example. Since the Right has historic, consistent, and logical reasons for opposing welfare, this lack of clarity and even outright liberal obfuscation has fueled right-wing fears that the welfare state is a leftist trick, perpetrated on the American people by socialistically oriented social workers and social planners.⁴ More important, the inability of people on the Left to claim and defend welfare as a social achievement for all (regardless of its real contradictions and failures of implementation) has created an opening for right-wing ideas and proposals to enter the mainstream political arena without a base for effective opposition.⁵

Basing my arguments on my twenty-five years of activism around welfare issues, I propose here that the Right is *correct* to see welfare as a symbol of all they oppose, and I urge those of us who profess an alternative view to openly defend, redefine, and expand the broadest but most democratic vision of a welfare state.

Welfare and Historical Right-Wing Fears

Our [Massachusetts] almshouse paupers are nearly all foreigners . . . Aliens and their children embrace five-sixths of all who become chargeable . . . the greater proportion are lazy, ignorant, prejudiced, unreasonable, receiving charity of the state as a right rather than as a favor.

From 1857, cited in David Bennett, *The Party of Fear*

Historically, the positive concept of "welfare" has presumed a general obligation of collective society to maintain all of its members at some minimal standard, and its deep and abiding opposition to this very presumption, albeit for widely differing reasons, has united the Right.⁷ Any understanding of the power of the Right today must build upon an awareness of the historic force of differing fears about the nature of welfare as well as upon an understanding of how the fantasy bugaboo of welfare has been used in varied ways by separate strands of the right-wing tradition.

We might begin our story by remembering that when the leaders of the most successful right-wing movement in U.S. history sat down to write the Constitution of their Confederacy of Southern States in 1861, they quickly cribbed from the original U.S. Constitution. The only major changes created a more explicitly white supremacist society and left no doubt as to the legality of black slavery and states' rights. One of the few other substantive changes made by the reframers was the deletion of a simple clause in the Preamble: No longer was the government of a master race even to claim as one of its purposes "to promote the general welfare." And after being defeated in their national quest, racists moved on to oppose Reconstruction's minuscule social welfare efforts as fostering "dependence and unrealistic expectations" among former slaves.⁸

To move the narrative ahead, we can also observe how, over the past sixty years, whenever the Right has again threatened to eliminate "welfare," the goal was a similarly basic challenge to the goal of a liberal society. Usually the enemy was almost any form of government aid that might create guarantees and expectations of collective security—although the embodiment of all that can go wrong was most often presumed to be AFDC. This small federal program began with the Social Security Act of 1935, which since then has provided basic income maintenance to mainly single-parent families with children, while never claiming even 2 percent of total federal expenditures. Sometimes very specific criticisms emerged, about what was wrong with this program as an entitlement and as a bureaucratic structure, leading to cries for "welfare reform." But in historic and even in much current conservative social commentary, "welfare" easily slips into more expansive meanings. "Long-term use of welfare," from whatever source of need-based government funds, is often listed as one characteristic of a so-called underclass. "Welfare dependency" may be defined as a problem of homeless people, many of whom are disabled and are receiving federal or state funding, or both, for basic subsistence, not AFDC. Conversely, politicians and pundits usually shrink meanings when they talk about the "welfare state," only including programs for the poorest of the poor in their definition—while denying the full array of government programs established to assist veterans, students, seniors, home buyers, and businesses after World War II.

Whatever the specific usage at any point in time, however, the very idea of a guarantee of "general welfare" has continued to be a key part of the answer whenever right-wing thinkers, across the full range of traditions, have asked what is wrong in America. Social Darwinists saw charity as "strengthening the weak, and weakening the strong." Nationalist nativists worried about our social generosity encouraging more "irresponsible aliens" to cross the border. Racists warned that welfare rewards the very laziness and propensity toward dependence that they see inherent in people of color. And always, fundamentalist Christian morality provided an overarching source of symbols, metaphors, and standards for the organization of private life that viewed any source of outside relief from intimate obligations as a profound threat to moral order.

Yet despite their mutual fears, each of the major streams of right-wing tradition also viewed the danger of welfarism in somewhat different ways. It is useful, then, to examine the varied right-wing concerns in order to understand both how they have been historically separated and how they now have, through a set of contemporary congruences that are both accidental and purposefully cultivated, joined together in a fused, self-referential fantasy.

Disparate Fears

The first set of right-wing fears about America emerge from traditional radical capitalist worries that too many fetters on rich people (or on people trying to become rich) or too much support for "nonproductive elements" would fatally weaken the society.⁹ Since the economy is most productive when successful people are able to risk, invest, and hire whomever they want under any terms that suit them, poor people are either personally to blame for making bad choices or, at best, are viewed as only fulfilling a normal economic role that can be changed through their individual initiative. When they collectively claim assistance from the state—rather than just individually seeking the opportunity to find paid work, at whatever wages and terms are offered—poor people threaten the freedom of capitalists to take the most profitable course of action.

Radical capitalists have seldom presented their class interests so baldly. Instead, their positive agenda has been framed as an intense valuing of "freedom"—the economic freedom to become rich (even though in the 1880s and the 1980s we almost stepped over the edge into just admiring wealth for its own sake, with no apologies). Their negative fears have been expressed in warnings about the dire effects, not of poverty (seen as a natural economic phenomenon that even engenders personal hardiness) but of pauperism or the ability to make *any* claim on the state for economic relief. In theoretical and polemical works spanning the past century, they

posit the only legitimate use of government as helping capital when business interests want help (and that, too, is risky because "robust" capitalism can be softened up by too much government help).¹⁰ Even in times of dire depression, radical capitalists proclaimed the inevitable dangers of expanding government, no matter how compelling the populist demands. When government tries to help, so the argument goes, it still really hurts everyone—because people become less free to make and keep their money and more likely to be fooled into thinking that government will be there to bail them out when they fail. Freedom and individual creativity are stifled whenever capitalism has buffers like those erected in what Bob Dole calls our "sixty-year detour" experiment with a welfare state.

However, much of this century was a period when, as historians across a wide spectrum agree, politics were driven by assumptions that dire poverty was a greater threat to the economic order than were carefully constrained welfare programs. Thus, for years radical capitalists were pushed to the margins of social debate—as the more successful internationalist capitalists agreed to "pay the price" for social harmony. Only in the last two decades has such "fundamentalist capitalism" been rehabilitated, based in large part on a carefully orchestrated effort to link liberal capitalism to welfare statism.

Nationalism and nativism provide a second strain of fears for America.¹¹ This old school, the motto of which was "America is the greatest country in the world but it is being weakened by outsiders and unpatriotic Americans," historically viewed immigrants as a danger to a healthy nation and to a rewarding economy for "real Americans." It spun a vision of a united, patriotic, and militarily prepared national community threatened by a lack of national strength and by enemies that corrupted from within and without. The other side of nationalism was nativism: If anybody new came here, their "Americanism" could be questioned. Of course, if newcomers were white, acted exactly like the people who had been here before, and did not make any claims for welfare, then it was easier for them to quickly become "good Americans."

Nationalists and nativists were not as historically fearful of government or even of some forms of welfare as the radical capitalists. After all, they wanted some government and a strong military as symbol of our country's special mission. And although nativists always feared immigrants and wanted to bar services that attracted them, they also wanted a punitive government of police, courts, and even schools and social workers to do something to the immigrants: control them, send them back if they grew uppity, make rules for them, force them to behave like Americans. Therefore, fears of immigrants did not always translate particularly into opposition to welfare, since social programs were often a way of "controlling the dangerous classes."¹²

Third, white racists, building on arguments articulated by the proslavery movement and the Confederacy, embody deeply intertwined fears of blacks and government welfare programs. For twentieth-century white supremacists, dark people are so different culturally (and probably genetically) that, at the least, they need to stay on their own because they will corrupt and besmudge all that is strong and good in this society (they are even sometimes called "Mud People," as in the notorious *Turner Diaries*). Thus, the Civil Rights movement, like Reconstruction, is accused of undermining the natural social order, and government programs aimed at "uplifting" blacks have been seen as a new form of malevolent slavery that has merely replaced the benevolent slavery of the "old plantation." More recently, less overt racists still see government programs aimed at blacks as inevitably bound to fail because such people will be "culturally resistant" to responsibility.

The racist strand of right-wing thought builds directly on the same fears that helped defeat the abolitionists' struggle for real equality.¹³ As the story goes, if only black people (and their white radical allies) had not insisted on "fatally flawed" programs like Reconstruction then, or poverty programs and affirmative action now, white people would feel safe. All our problems can be traced somehow, ultimately, to the very presence of black people in our midst. Repugnant as this tradition is, even to many radical conservatives, militant white supremacists (and Christian Identity movement members) like Randy Weaver find friends when they cry "freedom" from government and when they articulate fears about the reduced prospects for white men, because of the gains, and the welfare drains, of black people. Always, then, white supremacists have militantly feared the consequences of national government involvement in any "private" affair like race relations, either directly or simply by targeting resources toward mostly black urban areas.

Fourth, radical fundamentalist moralism has played an important historical role in establishing a faith-based fear of the welfare state. Usually less focused on dogma than on upholding proper "Christian" behavior (and tied to a defense of the traditional family hierarchy where god > father > mother > child), this tradition has historically been deeply Protestant, although there have been recent efforts to bridge the historic chasm between fundamentalist Protestantism and conservative Catholicism.¹⁴ Fundamentalist groups have primarily seen the country's problems as resulting from godlessness, from a breakdown in the traditional moral order embodied in families and churches. Most recently they have seen society as profoundly threatened by the facts of divorce, "illegitimacy," teen pregnancy, homosexuality, and even more so by secular humanist values that do not judge such behavior.

But Christian fundamentalists have only been episodic members of the political Right. Historically, they have been torn by conflicting impulses: the fear of being corrupted by the secular world versus the need to stand up for God's law and order; the mandate to engage in Christian charity versus the need personally to judge sin and oppose sinners. It has always taken strong leadership to move fundamentalist Christians beyond their fears that getting involved in the state is corrupting, regardless of the sinfulness in the world. And, of course, there has always been a belief that some charity had to be provided, even to sinners, but if believers got too close to such people, without converting them, they might themselves become tainted.¹⁵

Finally, a fifth stream of radical elitism has historically presented profoundly conservative fears regarding America's disorderliness, reflecting a heritage more akin to European aristocratic patterns than to other domestic U.S. traditions. This perspective has influenced the world of ideas by finding society is most challenged not by the fettering of capitalism but by too much power for the ignorant and too many collectivist experiments. In this century the long-standing intellectualist and elitist tradition evolved and intersected with nationalist, anticommunist radical capitalism, arguing that socialism, and even an overly populist democracy, is bad because it is anticapitalist and disorderly and because it gives people a sense of too many rights.¹⁶

From the radical elitist perspective, seen for years in William Buckley's *National Review*, socialism or "collectivism" in any form is to be greatly feared because it legitimates the dangerous idea that people on the bottom can wrongly claim equality with, and resources from, those on the top. The welfare state, as the institutional embodiment of the ascendancy of the bottom, is therefore the "natural enemy of quality"; it allows people to start expecting too much and creates all sorts of programs that disrupt the natural hierarchies by redistributing wealth and rights downward.

Historical Implications

These long-standing but disparate right-wing traditions were only partially marginalized during the past century. However ineffective members of the right wing were at claiming majority national attention after the defeat of the Confederacy and the success of progressivism, their fears have always had more popular power to mobilize the citizenry than liberals wanted to admit.¹⁷ At local levels, in churches, newspapers, and state legislatures, there have always been strong arguments, if not organized forces, to represent such radically conservative perspectives. Collections of fundamentalist sermons or congressional debates of any year yield voices just like those of today's Right. For years, the military has

been a seedbed for the types of "freedom"-oriented radical nationalists who formed the militia movement—as the quest for the Oklahoma bombers briefly revealed. And the Confederate flag has remained a watered down but real symbol of cultural and racial reaction—witness Pat Buchanan's defense of it in 1996. How widespread the acceptance of such ideas has been is another question, of course. Nonetheless, it is still important to accept that capitalist, elitist, nativist, racist, and traditionally "moral" perspectives have been part of the daily culture for many ordinary white people living outside of major northern urban centers and have, indeed, presented a set of bedrock, reactionary core values upon which contemporary right-wingers currently draw.

As we can see, then, the varying streams of the right-wing tradition in America have offered the public remarkably compatible fears—fears that people at the bottom of society's economic, cultural, racial, social, and moral hierarchy would claim collective legitimacy and rights and thereby take away the opportunities for "good, hardworking, God-fearing Americans" to live well. Increasingly, twentieth-century welfare programs, provided as rights, as "entitlements" without automatic bars on ever-expanding expectations, were viewed as offering a highly dangerous opportunity for society's losers to weaken the nation, the economy, the culture, and the race. When Barry Goldwater warned against "welfareism" that stemmed from "government policies which create dependent citizens [and] inevitably rob a nation and its people of moral and physical strength," he encapsulated the common fears that began to become clearer during the last quarter century.¹⁸

Yet, until the 1970s, the recurring pattern was that the Right fragmented, divided, and distrusted itself because of differing goals, strategies, and tactics, with little unity gained from its shared fears. But since that time, as commentators across the political spectrum have seen, the Right began self-consciously to coalesce and, spurred by external events, to create a fusion of interests unprecedented in U.S. history. A critical part of this new fusion was the turning of long-standing mutual fears of welfare into a common fantasy regarding the possibility of reversing the gains that had been made, first by the Great Society, then by the New Deal, and finally by the whole set of efforts begun a century ago under the optimistic hopes of a "progressive movement."

Welfare and Current Right-Wing Fantasies

It is time to set the record straight. If religious conservatives took their proper proportionate place as leaders in the political and cultural life of the country, we would work to create the kind of society in which presumably all of us would like to live: safe neighborhoods, strong families, schools that work, a smaller government and

lower taxes. . . . Government would be small because citizens and private institutions would voluntarily perform many of its functions. We would not need a large bloated welfare state to take care of us, for we would take care of each other. We would not need the law to threaten or cajole us, for a higher law would live in our hearts. . . . In short, we desire a good society based on the shared values of work, family, neighborhood and faith.

Ralph Reed, Christian Coalition*

The growing strategic and organizational unity among right-wing forces since the 1970s has been well documented.²⁰ My purpose is not to track the overall process by which the Right grew through Reaganism to become the powerful force we now see flexing its muscles in Congress, in presidential politics, and in the media. Instead, I want to suggest how opposition to welfare, and to welfare statism, has become an essential strategic linchpin for a new and finally successful right wing. Opposition to welfare has emerged from being an issue on the back burner, an underlying and discardable fear in the days before Reagan, emerging to become a major way in which right-wing ideas find broader legitimacy and resonance today. It now supplies one of the central fantasies that have re-framed right-wing rhetoric into a popularly appealing vision for a post-cold war, postwelfare world.

Roots of Victory

Since the 1970s, several external factors have helped strategists seeking to unite the Right to use their underlying fears of welfare, pauperism, and "dependency" as a base for a new, wider vision. By exploiting these factors and bolstering them with a barrage of writing and organizing, right-wing activists have buried the historical contradictions of the varied strains of ideology under a growing, united opposition to welfare and a shared fantasy of how healthy society would be if we could just forever abolish "the failed welfare state."

First, perhaps the most pivotal change in the environment nurturing right-wing thought was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the broad-scale exposure of the problems that permeated Soviet-style systems. This colossal change has given credence to radical capitalist arguments that capitalism can be triumphant if it is untainted by socialist compromises like welfare. Without a cold war to force us to show the social benefits of American democracy, the victors need take no prisoners nor make any compromises to buffer the effects of the economic "realities" of capitalism. Despite the growing inability of global capitalism to provide the United States with the same level of economic security that it did after World War II, much less full economic justice, it faces no significant opposition as a prescription for how to organize a society or even a world.

Any remaining problems result from constraints placed on capitalism, from places where socialism has crept in and especially from people who have become dependent on its "benefits." Thus, for example, privatization—which makes sense in Russia, where every corner store was a state enterprise—is used here to gradually dismantle the U.S. welfare state and erode the social expectations it inevitably created. Now radical capitalists and those elitists who want social order can come together in a new, less crude form of anticommunism, focused primarily on replacing the dangers posed by a welfare state with Newt Gingrich's "Opportunity Society" of freewheeling entrepreneurialism.²¹

Now, too, the "cowboy" capitalists can get back at the "Yankees," who have been willing since the Progressive Era to allow government to create a social safety net, at the cost of continued assurance of social peace, favorable taxes, and tariff structures. Eastern liberal capitalists, and their political representatives, are tainted with welfare statism and are told to abandon their support for government with much the same vehemence heard from the Goldwaterites who once booed Nelson Rockefeller.²² We can have a hegemonic anticommunism—without having to prove that anyone ever had a party membership card. Anybody who still dares to demand a responsive, dependable government or a redistributive tax system is automatically labeled a "politically correct collectivist," a "domestic socialist," who is therefore responsible for the growth of the welfare-maintained underclass. We can limit free speech—not by outlawing Communist parties but by stopping social welfare professionals from legislative advocacy if they receive any public funding, as so many do in a privatized delivery system.²³

Second, the dramatic increase in immigration over the past fifteen years has triggered the revival of nativism, along with a fusing of radical capitalist, nationalist, and nativist sentiments in joint opposition to social programs for newcomers. Books like *The Path to National Suicide: An Essay on Immigration and Multiculturalism* and journals like the Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review* now clearly state their belief: Immigrants are still the problem. They are trouble not only because they are here but especially because they can now claim certain economic and social protections and rights unavailable to previous generations of immigrants.²⁴ We can still let some in, but only if they leave family behind and if they expect nothing—except the chance to work at any wage, under any conditions. Although some of the most paranoid and racist nativists find the very presence of immigrants to be a problem, for most the goal is simply getting them back into subservient positions, speaking English only and asking for nothing from a welfare state. In times of economic stagnation for the working classes, no matter how glittering the growth at the top, once again fear of immigration emerges as a bedrock reaction, with the successful attempt to curb welfare for immigrants as a cornerstone to "recovery."

Third, the Gulf War has, as was loudly proclaimed, "ended the Vietnam syndrome" and has made militaristic patriotism popular again. Few mainstream journalists now offer any criticisms of military spending, nor is war seen as an inherently problematic undertaking. The effects on our emerging fantasy are complex but seem to shore up a rekindled national consensus that social problems—in the schools and the streets—can also be cured with tough, military-style discipline, not with efforts to provide support to families and, especially, youth. Thus, we have schools run by generals and a return to uniforms and boot camps as models for youth programs.

Fourth, the changes in women's status and options since the 1960s have provided especially critical impetus for fusion of right-wing forces.²⁵ Despite all the failures to gain political and economic power, women over the past thirty years *have* made real challenges to the established ordering of male priorities: More women are proudly in the workforce; more are able to divorce and not be forced into remarriage; more are challenging sexual harassment, stalking, rape, and incest. These are challenges that the Right must turn back or fundamentalist morality's house of cards will come down. From the perspective of traditionalist Christianity especially, feminism is the enemy.²⁶

By now radical capitalists, and even many fundamentalist Christians, have accommodated to economic pressures that require women to be more "in the world" than they have ever been in history. Conservatives seldom deny women's quests for jobs with fair wages today, although child care is usually seen as an earned benefit and any glass ceiling is viewed as resulting from women's "choices." Not even the "failure of the family" is blamed on a woman's employment, unless she takes her job too seriously. And divorce itself is tolerated, although the Religious Right waffles here, usually decrying the high rates of "no-fault" divorce and accepting the strained logic that pregnant women and girls are better off with "pressured" marriages, which are likely to end in divorce.²⁷

Instead, the real danger is defined as women's ability to *choose* to live without men, not the problem of their being abandoned. The Right correctly sees that feminists celebrate women's right to raise their children without men and that they rightly find the fundamental policy base of that entitlement in AFDC. Here the Christian Right and the radical capitalists are unified: Once women can positively claim welfare, no matter how compromised, as a substitute for the "protection" of a man or an employer, then both the traditional family and the "necessities" of the workplace are threatened.

Furthermore, for thirty years women have also been opening up the secrets of the patriarchal family: the violence, the abuse, the incest. And they have done so not just to name men's sins in order to reform them but to

justify the rights of women to live without men. This work has been more radical and frightening than we feminists have often ourselves understood, but women as well as men on the Right have clearly seen the implication: that even talking about such intimate injustice cracks the whole culture of dominance of men over women.²⁸ Since right-wingers cannot acknowledge even to themselves that incest, battering, and rape are the systemic methods that subjugate women, they are in a pickle. But they *can* say that single families are bad, turn children into criminals, and take them away from the "love and discipline" and legitimacy that only a father can bring. They can assert that if such things happen at all it is primarily in families of the "underclass," where bad people have made bad choices while weakened by welfare. And they can blame the media and feminists for trying to "present deviance as the norm." In this context of denial, any economic right, given without punishment, that allows women to support themselves and their children outside the authority of either a husband or a boss is profoundly suspect. Women unconstrained by the discipline of marriage or workplace are inherently more likely to "blow the whistle" on all the problems at the heart of so-called family values in this country, so they must be silenced and demonized.²⁹

Out of this deep material, the moralist Right has asserted leadership by creating a fearful fantasy that incorporates other streams of right-wing thought. The fantasy says that the pain Americans are feeling does *not* result from our confusion about how to handle more gender equality, especially at a time when everyone's economic expectations are being downsized—oh, no. Rather, our misery is caused by women without men who have too many rights, who do not accept their suffering gracefully. Women on welfare then represent all women who are asserting their right to live without men and to claim their rights to "child support" if not from fathers, then from the state. Unless women present themselves as total victims (and then only if they stop any claims to victimhood after a specified time limit), they find little support from a set of coalescing arguments that posit their very existence as a terrifying alternative to the male-headed family and to every citizen's "obligation" to accept any employment under any conditions.

Finally, the limited but real success of African-American social activism has also served to link varied strands of the Right, most importantly by rejuvenating the racist Right. As Jill Quadagno has pointed out, popular opposition to the Great Society was easily channeled into intertwined antiwelfare, antiminority rhetoric. Today, old racist arguments that people of color demand and receive too much have reemerged in the attacks on government as a provider and protector of economic or social rights, with welfare as a prime example of what many white people see as excessive and divisive claims by people of color. Thus, even though

the evidence is less out in the open, to understand the power of today's right-wing agenda we must understand how overt racism plays into the emerging fear that "we have given it all away."³⁰

Achieving Fusion

In order for these changed circumstances to coalesce into a fused, self-conscious interpretation, a unified vision was needed. Here the work of Paul Weyrich, Pat Robertson, the Heritage Foundation, and others was critical, as was the increasing influence of writers (supported by conservative foundations) who sanitized hard-right ideas for less-ideological audiences. After all, when, in 1960, the city manager of Newburgh, New York, a John Birch Society member, tried to force welfare recipients (both General Relief and AFDC) to work off their benefits and to pick up their checks at the police station, he was stopped and was widely criticized—and few conservatives sought national attention by defending him. When Goldwater talked about "welfarism" he received cheers from right-wing audiences (and was chosen by 38 percent of the electorate) but was generally seen as too extremist.

After 1964, others, like Milton Friedman, kept writing and slowly developed a following for antistate economic theory. Conservative economists and critics began writing somewhat turgid books about the costs and bureaucracy of the welfare state that received some mainstream attention and normalized the questioning of welfare. And although George Gilder was first treated as a crank when he revealed to a more general public the evils of welfare and the need to "wean" people from the welfare state as a first step in righting the moral and behavioral wrongs of America, the election of Reagan gave credence to Gilder's ideas and served as a base from which more mainstream writers could call for "an end to welfare."

During the Reagan era, a new generation of conservative think tanks sponsored speakers, writers, and studies, which launched a reinterpretation of the whole Great Society, and of AFDC in general, as the source of a "practice and ideology" of dependency, with increasing emphasis on the danger of welfare use for families. No longer was the problem just that which had long troubled radical capitalists—a costly, ineffective governmental bureaucracy. Soon hard-right commentators joined with less-conservative writers in characterizing the poorest of the poor as an "underclass," created not by the pressures of poverty but in large part by drug abuse, crime, and illegitimacy, behaviors themselves glibly associated with "long-term welfare dependence."³¹

Therefore, when Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead hit the bookstores and airwaves in the mid-1980s with full-blown arguments that so-

cial welfare policy itself created antisocial behavior among almost all recipients, in addition to creating a permanent underclass, and that welfare programs had to be abolished or made almost totally punitive and work-oriented for the *benefit* of the poor, the basis for today's attack on welfare was complete.³² A cohesive right-wing argument had been crafted and was presented as a "new consensus" that welfare had failed.

The new arguments pushed far into the mainstream of both political parties, so that by the early 1990s the policy discussion, if not the political rhetoric, shifted away from talking (except in select circles) about "bad people." Instead, the Right could present itself as being the political force with the *real* sympathy for those who endured the bad system that created their poverty, who only needed help to break the "habit of welfare," to attain freedom from bureaucracy, and to have a chance to participate in a rejuvenated economy and revived moral order. Mead, however, like the nativists of old, also argued for government-imposed work programs and other policies to force people to accept employment on any terms. Since welfare, especially "long-term welfare dependence of the underclass," had become a coded way to talk about people of color, "welfare reform" became an acceptable way to do something about black people without being so explicit (although both Murray and, especially, Mead were clear that blacks were the main group needing improved behavior).

Right-wing writers and politicians presented themselves as the true protectors of families (and women), by getting them off welfare and by not offering them the temptation to opt out of the work and family ethic. In Marvin Olasky's words, the way to "renew American Compassion" was by ending the welfare state.³³ Given its tradition of charity, a key step in this progression was convincing the Christian Right to join the assault on welfare. Here Newt Gingrich himself was pivotal, because years ago he made it his explicit goal to "capture the moral high ground" by showing how "no one has been more harmed by the Great Society than the poor," thereby demonstrating his, and the current Right's, "ability to take an issue, rotate it in three-dimensional space, and in the process of doing that, change the character of the debate."³⁴

Thus, as the post-World War II economy's long-term retrenchment had begun, the cold war had ended, immigration had increased, and churches had revived in opposition to moral decline, it could all fit together. AFDC became the undefended symbol of all that was wrong with the economy and the people: It hurt society by creating bloated bureaucracies; it undermined the economy by artificially raising wages and giving poor people options besides the "hard labor" that had built America. It broke down families by taking fathers out of the house, by allowing mothers to run a household without fathers or jobs, and by not even caring whether parents were married. It supported a dark-skinned under-

class that was already especially averse to work, and it corrupted new immigrants away from working. It destroyed the "American ethic" of personal responsibility.

With such an enemy, the vision grows clear: Society can renew itself only if it gives up its commitment to a "false compassion" and goes back to individualism and basic values of work, faith, and family, as Marvin Olasky has argued:

The perspective from 1990 shows that the social revolution of the 1960s has not helped the poor. More women and children are abandoned and impoverished. The poor generally, and the homeless particularly are treated like zoo animals at feeding time. . . . Let's transport an able-to-work, homeless person back from the present to 1890 and ask the question, "Are you better off now than you were then?" Then he would have been asked to take some responsibility for his own life, and to help others as well, by chopping wood or cleaning up trash. Then he would have had to contact other people, whether relatives or other colleagues. Now he is free to be a "naked nomad" shuffling from meal to meal.

And what of the children? Let's transport an abandoned child from the present to 1890 and compare treatment now—shuttling from foster home to foster home, or growing up without a daddy—to treatment then, when adoption into two-parent families was a priority preached about in churches and facilitated by a lack of bureaucracy.³⁵

In short, welfare, the welfare state, and specifically AFDC now serve as the designated enemy for a vision of the antiwelfare society, where we have no federal floor under poverty, where social spending is so suspect that it can never again be claimed as a sign of social progress. And those who would try to defend welfare have now become the true enemies of our chance to "morally rearm" America and allow people to function as responsible citizens. They have to be shoved aside, along with other politically correct associates, if America is to reach a brighter future.

What Is Happening Now

Welfare has not been just poor policy—that's much too mild. It has been a form of social blasphemy. The truth is, for the last 30 years, our social welfare policies have trumped the accumulated wisdom of human civilization—and overturned rules set in stone ever since men and women first grew their own groceries 10,000 years ago. . . .

In some communities, government has stomped out all that was once vibrant: church, family, and neighbors—and replaced them with nothing but a small, steady, alluring and demeaning little check. The results certainly haven't been as neutral as the checks. We've shaken together a cocktail of fatherlessness and immature motherhood that turned out to be combustible. It has exploded into guns and drugs and boys who kill before they start shaving. . . .

Why are Republicans getting elected right and left in America today? Because we are the only ones telling the truth about the damage the Great Society has done. . . . I hope America comes up with a welfare reform law that will allow all of us to get back to the business of raising children who know there's a floor underneath them: church, family and community—the planks of civilized life—

William Weld, Governor of Massachusetts³⁶

By 1997, the fantasy has become well framed, institutionalized in the villainous Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, or PRWOA (the 1996 "welfare reform" bill) and widely shared beyond the Right. And not only welfare recipients suffer. The bipartisan passage of the welfare reform bill, which could have been successfully vetoed, has ended federal entitlements to AFDC and has forced states to deny eligibility for many block-grant funds to most legal immigrants and to teen mothers living alone, among its most notable aspects. Sadly, even the defeated opposition to the bill was primarily raised based on arguments about the extent of change needed, not because there is widespread opposition to the general approach. And with the successful passage of welfare reform, the various strains of the Right have come together more powerfully than perhaps even they quite realize themselves, having created a new consensus around welfare that prepares the ground for an even more tightly constrained "vision" for all of us, not just the poor.

Now there are intellectuals who openly call for a "new nationalism" and "communitarians" who stress obligations, not rights and unity of "basic values," not a valuing of diversity; and who decry an "overemphasis" on basic conflicts in society.³⁷ Now it is possible everywhere to hear echoes of old elitist traditions calling for renewed order and a unified community based on presumably shared values. Families (read: women) are again to be strengthened by caring for elders and wayward daughters. We hear arguments that only white men can be unifying leaders. By definition, people of color and women are "divisive" until they prove they can rally white men to their cause.

In my view, we are approaching a point of no return in this country's betrayal of its democratic promise with the kinds of proposals that are published in every issue of the Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review*, that are put forward in documents like the Contract with America and in the broader conservative social "covenant" of the Christian Coalition, and that of course underlie the new welfare reform bill. If we can, with great fanfare, pass laws that make legal immigrants unable to receive basic social security protections, what happens to the best of the American Dream? If we can tell mothers, just because they have broken our rules about women's place, that they can be cut off from any economic support for their children after a designated time or, at best, be forced to work for

basic maintenance without any guarantees of child care or health care, then who is next?

We have already seen states pass rules, with federal permission, that give no benefits to a child unlucky enough to be born to a mother already on welfare. Welfare reform starts to deny disability benefits to those who might be "using" a mental or addiction problem to avoid work. And if affirmative action goes next, there will be fewer and fewer people of color in positions of any authority to make whites uncomfortable or to see what is happening. There is no buffer to the "realities" of life in America when some criminals face a "three strikes and you're out" policy, when others confront mandatory capital punishment, when no benefits are available to pregnant teens and there are family caps facing welfare mothers. The motto of New Hampshire becomes nationalized, not as "live free or die" but, instead, as "live free or we kill you."

Alternative Fantasies Without Fears

Intellectually and politically, the challenge is to define an alternative vision for combating the corrosive right-wing fears and fantasies. A chapter like this is no place to do so, especially without sounding hopelessly rhetorical. All I can do is briefly suggest a few of the basic elements of the strategy that welfare rights activists are forging in their heretofore lonely struggle to defend themselves and the rights of all to basic security.

First, welfare rights advocates know that the only way to answer the fears that poor people are "taking advantage" is to acknowledge that *most* people feel economically vulnerable. The trick is to show how the problem is structural, caused by the "choices" of rich people to protect themselves. The goal is to find ways to show how poor people *share* bad times; neither they nor the welfare system cause everyone's pain. The National Welfare Rights Union, working with the national Share the Wealth Campaign, is consciously reconnecting to traditions of left-wing populism and trying to build a campaign that shows how wealthy people both benefit from conscious decisions by politicians and are currently feathering their own nests while shifts in the world economy make the rest of us more insecure.

Second, welfare rights activists know that it is not enough just to question inordinate government wealth benefits, because that can, and does, lead some middle-class populists to simply argue that the state must be cut for everyone. Instead, the only way to turn the debate around is to expose how a fully global capitalist economy now gives most people less economic security and puts more people at greater risk of real poverty. Since that means greater job insecurity, lower wages and benefits, increased single parenthood, and constant health care "crises," then we

must organize around demands to *strengthen* the welfare state, to protect everyone with income guarantees as well as with calls for full employment at living wages. Indeed, one good effect of the criticisms of the existing welfare system as too bureaucratic is to give new power to the welfare rights movement's long-standing complaints about how the system is administered.

Third, any new programs proposed by the Left must insist on democratic and respectful processes, instead of viewing the fact of asking for assistance as an automatic sign of pathology. The goal is to break the demonization of welfare recipients and push people to admit that "there but for fortune" go their families, so that we can begin to reopen demands for "basic income" guarantees, benefit and wage subsidies, and breadwinning wages for jobs that no longer exist. Welfare rights advocates know that this will mean challenging the conventional realism of the Left that there is no "political support" for income programs, but their hope is to build on alternative democratic traditions that grow out of labor, civil rights, and feminist movements in other countries.

Fourth, the "race card" must be trumped by demanding a welfare state built upon more than calls for increased individual responsibility of black men and communities. Black leaders, especially, must not abandon welfare recipients, and white activists must work to assure that alternative proposals contain concrete strategies that neither relegate people of color to the dole nor deny access to meaningful job opportunities. This is a tough area: Because the connections between racism and antiwelfare rhetoric are very deep and because the ways in which AFDC has indeed been experienced as racist oppression, many African-American activists have traditionally had a hard time taking up the "welfare rights" banner. But if we broaden the demand to "income rights" or to the need to defend "family security" through public commitments, there is room for intellectual and strategic movement.

Finally, women on welfare know that the key will be to reclaim the "moral" arguments about what constitutes healthy families and to stop the widespread denial regarding how real people in most families really behave. We are divorced and have affairs. Most of us, not just welfare recipients, can name a relative with a drinking or drug problem. We are related to some teenager who "got in trouble" or at least could not easily find his or her way. There are more "funny uncles" and "stepfathers to stay away from" than we like to admit. If we acknowledge the *normality* of our "dysfunctions," both social and economic, then we may well be on the road to the identification across classes and identities that is our only hope for the denial built into new calls for "family values."

As depressing as the victories of the fused Right may be, I still find some hope (on some days) because now more people are forced into the

place where welfare rights activists have been for years: We *know* we have no choice but to organize the broadest movement possible. True, the Right will win more before it loses, but we can only reject the social suicide with which the Right tempts us if we understand what is happening.

This chapter began by mentioning the Confederacy, as a way of recalling just how far the American Right is willing to go and as a means of suggesting that we need to reclaim the fervor and breadth of the abolitionist movement if we are to succeed. In that effort, some of us will be called upon to preach, some to teach, some to help women and children hide. We may have to storm some barricades and plot some underground escape paths. And we will need a new vision of rights as economic and social justice that will be broad enough not only to include all diversities but to accept leadership from those who have experienced the worst this society offers. To know the fears, fantasies, and actions of today's Right is an absolute first step for any new effort to combat it. Our necessity is to create a movement as broad, visionary, and focused as the best of the one forged by our ancestors a century and a half ago.

Notes

1. This quote is from Ellen Green, a woman who is on welfare and whose statement is one of many that I have gathered in coediting, with Diane Dujon, *For Crying Out Loud: Women's Poverty in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1996).

2. John Salvi, the accused murderer of workers in the Brookline abortion clinics, wrote a generally incoherent statement that seemed to link welfare with his problems and the sin of abortion. *Boston Globe*, January 3, 1995.

3. Although Lucy Williams's excellent article "The Right's Attack on Aid to Families with Dependent Children" (*Public Eye*, vol. 10 [3-4], Political Research Associates, Fall/Winter 1996) was written after most of the drafts of this chapter, I have still used it as a "checkpoint" for understanding the history.

4. For the best summary of how this worked historically, see Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 2d ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996). For a good example of this dramatic distrust, see "Absence of Judgment: What Social Workers Believe About the Poor Will Hamper Welfare Reform," *Policy Review* (November/December 1996), p. 50.

5. A good recent source of this argument, although it was a staple of John Birch Society conspiracy theory, is Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1993). Theodore Lowi's earlier book *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1969) helped to show how this failure of liberalism worked to legitimate conservatism.

6. Cited in David Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 73.

7. The literature on welfare and its meanings is very large. For our purposes here, the most useful recent sources on the history are Michael Katz, *Shadow of the Poorhouse*, and *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*

(New York: Pantheon, 1989). Mimi Abramowitz offers an important feminist analysis in *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, 2d ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1988). But these sources do not even touch on the extensive theoretical writing that has persistently kept growing over the past twenty years. For as good a summary as any, see Clyde W. Barrow, *Critical Theories of the State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

Recently, Italian philosopher Umberto Eco has identified "Ur Fascism" as a concept that allows us to comprehend the basic, but sometimes internally conflicting, themes that unite the modern Right across countries with different traditions and histories. His categories and approach are very useful, and I draw upon them here in trying to establish core themes. See *New York Review of Books*, October 1995.

8. W.E.B. Dubois's classic book, *Black Reconstruction*, chronicles well the absurdity of this and other white reactions to Reconstruction.

9. For me, the term "radical capitalism" is useful because it helps me think about the ideology associated with the most extreme logic of capitalism, as opposed to the very different logic that comes from capitalists who see a legitimate use of the state to help maintain a quality of life outside the market (as well as their power). As someone coming from a very strong "class struggle first" politics, it is hard for me to give capitalism any sort of credit, but I must now admit that the differences among capitalist politics are as significant as those between Stalinists and other kinds of socialists. I think the analogy of "fundamentalist capitalism" to fundamentalist religion is also useful, both of them being the more legalistic, rigid end of a spectrum that includes at the other end a more flexible, responsive set of behaviors and beliefs.

10. The sources that embody this approach are both theoretical and polemical, most notably Frederick Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944); Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1953). For a sympathetic but useful summary see Ronald H. Nash, *Freedom, Justice, and the State* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980). Also see George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

11. See Bennett's *The Party of Fear* for the best overview.

12. Here I am conflating a huge amount of social welfare history. Besides Katz, *The Shadow of the Poor House*, see Clarke Chambers's review of the tensions in social welfare history, "Toward a Redefinition of Welfare History," *American Historical Review* vol. 73, no. 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 18-37. See also Bruce Jansson, *The Reluctant Welfare State*, 2d ed. (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks Cole, 1996).

13. For an eerily depressing story of the decline of abolitionist influence, see James McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

14. Interestingly, the strong stand of the Catholic hierarchy on poverty and even on welfare reform itself may have inhibited this effort.

15. See George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). Ralph Reed works hard to confront these tensions in *Politically Incorrect: What Religious Conservatives Really Think* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994).

16. Few chroniclers of conservatism parcel out this strain very well, except for identifying its roots in Social Darwinism and tracing it through the thought of

Taft and the *National Review*. The most helpful are George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement* and Jerome Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

17. I know this from my own growing up in the lower-middle-class white South, where fundamentalist Christianity, racism, xenophobic nationalism, and nativism were, and are, just assumed to be "what everybody thinks." Robert Wiebe's neglected book, *The Segmented Society* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), does a good job of explaining how this happens, and in a more historical way, so does the Brinkely-Yohn-Ribuffo summary of the history of conservatism in the AHR Forum, "The Problem of American Conservatism," edited by Alan Brinkely (April 1994), p. 409-452.

18. Quoted in Jonathan Martin Kolkey, *The New Right, 1960-1968, with Epilogue, 1969-1980* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), p. 52. See Lucy Williams, "The Right's Attack."

19. Reed, *Politically Incorrect*, pp. 10-11.

20. For a recent treatment, see Jean Hardisty, "The Resurgent Right: Why Now?" available through Political Research Associates, Somerville, Massachusetts, 1995.

21. The Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review* was full of especially glowing predictions about how all this would work during 1990.

22. I still find Carol Oglesby's old analysis of a *Yankee-Cowboy War* (Norman: Sheed Andrew and McNeill, 1976) between Eastern and Western, international and domestic capitalists to be useful. Oglesby's cowboys are not, however, only right wing, and not all his Yankees are liberal. As the world economy shifts, we see many Yankees attracted and divided by the notion of unfettered capitalism—just read the contradictory editorials in the *Wall Street Journal*. It is fair to say, however, that both Gingrich and elitist conservatives in the *National Review* are seldom too critical of any type of capitalism, even though they "help" some big business leaders see the error in trusting the welfare state.

23. Newt Gingrich has even claimed that newspapers that oppose ending capital gains taxes are "socialist." And although the notorious Istook amendment, which would gag almost any advocacy among anyone receiving any federal funds, has not yet passed, it has already cast a chill over many of the more mainstream advocates that I work with. I do find helpful arguments against this acceptance of triumphant capitalism, which I find endemic in my adult students at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in the late Ralph Miliband's brilliant book, *Socialism for a Skeptical Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

24. Lawrence Auster argues for cutting immigration almost totally in *The Path to National Suicide* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1993). For the view that it is not immigration that is so bad but rather the welfare states' support of aliens after they arrive, see Ron K. Unz, "Immigration or the Welfare State: Which Is the Real Enemy?" *Policy Review* (Fall 1994), pp. 88-96. For a lively and revealing debate on the issue, see comments on Unz's article in the Winter 1995 *Policy Review*.

25. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), documented some of this, but it has also been explored in Linda Gordon's stunning introduction to *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

26. See Beverly LaHaye and various issues of Phyllis Schlafly's *Report*, as well as various articles by Robert Rector for the Heritage Foundation, such as his "Welfare Reform That Is Anti-Work, Anti-Family and Anti-Poor," in *Backgrounders* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1987).

27. See Marvin Olasky, *Tragedy*, p. 186, and Ralph Reed, *Politically Incorrect*. Also see Peter P. Arnn and Douglas Jeffrey, *Moral Ideas for America* (Claremont, CA: Claremont Institute, 1993).

28. I am especially indebted to Jean Hardisty of Political Research Associates, whose work on women of the Right helped me understand how it is that conservative women defend the existing order.

29. George Gilder is always especially telling here, but so are Charles Murray, *Losing Ground* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), and Marvin Olasky. Interestingly, a long-term study that has done extensive interviewing of women on welfare has found overwhelming evidence of the abuse and lack of nurturance that low-income women have experienced over their lives (Ellen Bassuk, "Single Mothers and Welfare," *Scientific American* October 1996, p. 60-66). Such information is often used by the Right to demonstrate the "pathology" of women on welfare, but I read it to show how dangerous so many "families," of all types, are and how they need to be fundamentally challenged as the automatic source of healthy values for all of us.

30. Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For polling data on white attitudes, see Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993). Also, here Dinesh D'souza's arguments against affirmative action and the continued power of racism are critical examples of the rush away from racism as an explanation for any preventive social action. Lucy Williams does an especially fine job of tracing the powerful racism inherent in the Right's antiwelfare arguments in "The Right's Attack."

31. For an excellent review of the range of writing on the underclass, see Michael Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

32. George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), and Lawrence Mead, *Beyond Entitlement* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

33. See Marvin Olasky's latest updating and popularizing of his earlier work *Renewing American Compassion: How Compassion for the Needy Can Turn Ordinary Citizens into Heroes* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

34. Newt Gingrich and Terry Kohler, quoted in Connie Brock, "The Politics of Perception," *New Yorker*, October 9, 1995, p. 75.

35. Olasky, *Renewing American Compassion*, pp. 222-223. Moral Rearmament (a name I have always loved) was an earlier right-wing movement, aimed at helping especially youth rebuild a commitment to national and moral values. The group has waned in recent years.

36. Statement as prepared for delivery by Governor William Weld, American Society of Newspaper Editors, October 13, 1995.

37. In the March 27, 1995, *New Republic*, John Judis and Michael Lind make a direct appeal "For a New Nationalism," deliberately harkening back to Teddy Roosevelt, pp. 19-27.