BY THE FEW FOR THE FEW

THE REAGAN WELFARE LEGACY

Tom Joe / Cheryl Rogers

By the Few for the Few

The Reagan Welfare Legacy

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Foreword

Joseph Califano, former secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, once called welfare the Middle East of domestic politics. It is at least as complicated, and almost as emotional. One of the coauthors of this very valuable book, Tom Joe, has been both in the trenches and the war rooms of the major front in the war on poverty for about 25 years. Yet this book is a new kind of venture for him, his coauthor, Cheryl Rogers, and their associates at the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Until now they have concentrated on being at the right place at the right time with fresh and relevant analyses of public policy issues. They have considered such issues in larger contexts—whether in the process of lawmaking or regulation-writing, or in getting the work done.

Here, however, Joe and Rogers have taken a step back, to reflect on where the Reagan revolution has moved both the theory and practice of helping the poor and disadvantaged in this country, and to speculate on the broad outlines of a counterrevolution. To sketch the book's conclusions and recommendations here would be a disservice to the cumulative power of a lot of gritty, disturbing facts and careful mounting of evidence. The authors suggest that the anecdotes upon which some of our present policies seem to be based and sold are more fraudulent than the fraud they were used to portray. Tom Joe knows intimately the long, winding trail of shifting federal policy intentions through statehouses, courthouses, and city halls to the actual delivery of checks and services. Hence, the book is able to show us the differences between stated intent and real outcomes in individual cases and families, as well as collectively. Here, if you will, are the real stories rather than anecdotal myths, the truth of discrete, disaggregated apples and oranges as against the simplistic and deceptive aggregations of lemons and passion fruit sometimes offered by the current administration.

None of us who knows the realities of the welfare past wants to go back to the way it was. There indeed was much that was wrong or counterproductive before Reagan, and the book's authors, working with previous administrations of both parties, participated in a series of welfare reform efforts. In fact, in looking at what has happened in the last four years, the book presents a case for what may be a central opportunity. The Reagan years have separated the problems of the nonworking

poor and the working poor. The Joe–Rogers analysis argues that both have suffered, but only the working poor have been abandoned. All right, they contend, this means it is now possible to have a carefully articulated, new, and different program designed to help those working people who have been slipping under the poverty line in distressing and ever-increasing numbers. The patching and repositioning of the Reagan safety net for the nonworking poor needs attention, but it can be handled on a largely separate basis. The critical task, this book suggests, is addressing the often desperate problems of the working poor, problems of health, of hunger, and of incentives to keep on struggling upward out of poverty.

Most social policy insiders already know and respect Tom Joe. He isn't like anybody else, either in the variety and intensity of his experiences or in his special knowledge and competence. He is a unique resource, a policy analyst who has lived in the midst of the messy realities of the problem at state and local levels as well as in the White House, the Congress, and the once and perhaps future Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Tom Joe has worked with and for Republicans and Democrats, executive- and legislative-branch staff and policymakers, local and nonprofit operators in the field, management, unions and professional associations, welfare rights advocates, and budget cutters. He has worked with one allegiance: to give the poor the greatest incentive and the best opportunity to escape both poverty and dependence, and to assure those who fall that their plight will not be ignored.

I hope this book extends the insiders' respect for Joe to a larger audience, and that this will permit him to make an even greater difference. And I further hope that aspiring policy analysts and program evaluators among this book's readers will emulate this model in the future. They will end up with dirtier fingernails and less elegant analyses, but they will make better contributions to the public weal.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In 1981, President Reagan proposed and the Congress enacted a set of sweeping policy changes and budget cuts in AFDC, the basic cash-assistance program for poor families. With the announcement of the proposed cuts, the Center for the Study of Social Policy began a study that spanned four years and traced the new policies from their inception through their enactment and implementation. The center's study, funded by the Ford Foundation and the Field Foundation, contained several components which together provide an in-depth spotlight on the government policy process.

We began somewhat inquisitively in 1981—when the welfare policy changes were first announced—by calculating their effects on typical family incomes. We then followed the legislative process through which Congress enacted them. One year later, we visited welfare offices in ten states to find out how the new policies were implemented and what effect they had had on state caseloads and budgets. To assess local implementation, we visited twenty-three county welfare offices in Georgia, reviewing case records and talking to local caseworkers. Finally, we interviewed 207 working-poor families in Georgia who had had their welfare benefits terminated as a result of the federal policies.

In some ways, the 1981 policy changes are over and done with. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been affected, and what was once new is now the norm. Our purpose here is not simply to reiterate the events of this period, but to help develop a better understanding of how government policies are developed, enacted, and implemented, with an eye toward improving this process in the future.

Acknowledgments

This book actually had many authors and an even greater number of reviewers. Although we cannot list them all here, we do want to acknowledge two colleagues: Peter Yu, for adding color and a sense of balance; and Mary Banks, without whose help this book would not have come about.

Introduction

This is a book about government, its capacities and its shortcomings, its success and its failures. Together, the chapters depict the essence of government—the human decisions and choices made daily that directly affect millions of people. The words show that government is far more than an automated, mechanical, predetermined system; instead it is driven by human insight, foibles, and occasionally, genius.

When we think of government, we generally do not think of its human qualities; we think of its institutions, born from traditions, agencies, and programs. This book is about some of these institutions. It touches on the legislative budget process, the politics of the executive branch, the federal-state "partnership" of a grant-in-aid program, and the local pulse of service delivery.

But government and its institutions must have a subject, for they do not exist in and of themselves. The subject of this book, then, is poverty, or, more precisely, poor people. These families—their lives, aspirations, and frustrations—make up the heart of the book, its raison d'être. In short, we try to show how poor people are ultimately affected by government and its institutions.

The particular government program addressed in this book is Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the nation's primary cash-assistance program for low-income families. In 1981, a set of policy changes was enacted that constituted a radical departure from past policy. These changes provide the vehicle for examining government policy-making and implementation.

Execution of the federal government's 1981 AFDC policy changes was a little like changing a tire on a moving automobile. Nothing slowed down for the occasion. Moreover, to press the analogy further, the federal government managed not only to change the tire on a moving car but also to change the car's direction. This book reflects an interest in both the tire-changing antics and the substantive shift in the direction of public policy toward the poor.

The specific subjects of the book are working-poor families headed by single women. These are families living on the edge, not as desperately poor as some with no income, but still in poverty, daily struggling with

the stark realities of economic hardship. These are people trying to raise themselves out of poverty by working. How we treat them is a crucial matter of governance.

This book describes a vertical process of government with respect to the AFDC policy changes of 1981. It analyzes the system from the beginning of a policy to its end, from ideology to reality. It explores who makes decisions, how they are made, how decisions are put into practice, and what impact they have. The story begins within the confines of the White House and the Office of Management and Budget; it proceeds through the corridors of Congress, in Washington, D.C.; to fifty state agencies; through various layers of federal and district courts, to thousands of local welfare offices throughout the country; and, eventually, to the individual families who were the ultimate targets of the policies. This process is far from simple or direct; it takes place within a tangle of government institutions and human dilemmas.

In tracing the flow of a particular set of public policies, this book provides a glimpse into the policy-making process from several vantage points. We try to get behind the AFDC changes to view them from the perspectives of several groups. We explore the administration's philosophy behind the changes, the reaction from interest and research organizations, congressional responses, the problems that state and local governments saw in trying to implement the new rules, and the caseworkers' and recipients' feelings about their effects. This perspective is important, as it conveys the tension and differences that are integral parts of the government policy process.

The book is divided into four parts. In part I, "The Context," we provide a framework for viewing the controversial AFDC policy changes. Chapter 1 briefly explores some of the dimensions of poverty—whom it affects, how it is measured, and what some of its causes are. Chapter 2 provides a brief history of government's responses to poverty and a more detailed overview of the structure of AFDC. In order to understand the importance of President Reagan's 1981 AFDC changes, both in theory and practice, it is necessary to understand the basic structure of the AFDC program. Without this understanding, the changes look like technical corrections of minor importance. This is a critical point because we often fail to understand a program's structural complexities and, as a result, we cannot gauge the impact of proposed "reforms."

Part II, "Policy Enactment and Implementation," takes an in-depth look at the 1981 AFDC amendments enacted as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA). Chapter 3 describes the administration's proposed AFDC changes and assesses public reaction to the plans. Chapter 4 analyzes the federal budget process and shows how the changes were enacted into law in 1981. Because a policy change merely begins

with legislative enactment, chapters 5 and 6 take a closer look at the intergovernmental implementation process. Chapter 5 examines state actions both to implement and minimize the effects of the OBRA amendments. Chapter 6 investigates implementation of OBRA at the local level and uses a case study to illustrate the practical and human problems of translating federal law into practice.

The most neglected part of the policy process is a timely assessment of the effects of planned change. Unfortunately, we rarely learn from our mistakes because all too often we begin a new series of changes before knowing the results of past ones. Part III, "Effects," addresses this problem by presenting research evidence on the effects of the 1981 AFDC changes. The AFDC changes, in part because they produced so much controversy, were subject to much scrutiny. Chapter 7 summarizes the findings from several major studies on the impact of the new law. Chapter 8 offers an in-depth look at the effects of the changes on a sample of working women in Georgia who were terminated from AFDC because of OBRA. The Georgia study is significant because it goes beyond the statistics to the human impact on mothers and their children.

A detailed analysis of the 1981 AFDC changes is useful only to the extent that lessons are learned from the experience. Part IV, "Lessons for the Future," synthesizes the conclusions that emerged from the OBRA experience and suggests alternative paths for helping low-income families in the future. Chapter 9 summarizes the results of OBRA and outlines the major lessons of its implementation. Chapter 10 points out the need to move beyond budget cuts to more positive strategies to assist the working poor. Four short-term reforms are suggested. In chapter 11, a case is made for developing long-range strategies to prevent poverty as well as an agenda for more immediate policy reforms. This section is predicated on the belief that government, with all the expertise available to it, can and should do a better job of ameliorating and preventing poverty in the future than it has in the past.

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Part I
The Context

1
The Problem of Poverty

The presence of poverty is not new and is not unique to the United States. There have been poor people as long as there has been property. But while the existence of poverty is old, the symptoms of poverty take on different forms in each society. The condition persists, but the faces, the reasons, the lives of poverty change. And although there are certain standard responses, each society deals with the problems of poverty differently.

In the United States, poverty has developed its own shape, changing over time. Today there are poor people in almost every community. There are also hard-core pockets of poverty among blacks and Hispanics in central cities, among white residents of Appalachia, among native Americans in communities in the Southwest, among farmers in the Midwest, and among a host of other families throughout the country. What binds these disparate families and individuals together is the lack of adequate income, the inability to secure basic necessities—food, clothing, and shelter—and the social and emotional isolation that such an economic condition conveys. Yet the very concept of poverty is elusive. Poverty eludes easy definition. Some see poverty as an absolute condition, associated with a medical or scientific standard—a tangible deficiency, such as malnutrition. Others see poverty as a relative condition, related to the distribution of wealth and resources in the society being considered. In this view, poverty is a severe inequity in the distribution of income and wealth. Those who favor an absolute definition might turn to an economic threshold tied to a medical or scientific standard. Those favoring a relative definition might establish a percentage of the average income as the poverty threshold—that is, everyone with income below, say, one-half the median income might be considered "poor."

There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach, and probably each is valid for different purposes. The official U.S. poverty standard is something of a hybrid of the two approaches. Developed in 1964 by the Social Security Administration as a means of counting poor persons, the standard is a partly absolute, partly relative estimate of the cost of a minimal standard of living. The absolute aspect consists of the Economy Food Plan—the cost of a "marketbasket" of food that constitutes

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