

# SEARCHING FOR AMERICA'S HEART



RFK AND THE RENEWAL OF HOPE

PETER EDELMAN

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RENEWAL OF HOPE



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**SEARCHING FOR  
AMERICA'S HEART**

To the women, and their children,  
who have been pushed to the edge — or beyond

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction i

1. Robert Kennedy:

*The Man Who Loved Children* 25

2. Robert Kennedy's Legacy:

*The Inner City, Race, Jobs, and Welfare* 59

3. From Kennedy to Clinton:

*The Two Americas Diverge Further* 95

4. Enter Bill Clinton 119

5. Life After Welfare 144

6. Rekindling the Commitment:

*Politics and Poverty in the New Century* 177

7. Breaking the Cycle:

*Children and Youth* 206

8. Finding America's Heart 240

Index 253



## INTRODUCTION

ON AUGUST 22, 1996, President Bill Clinton signed, with great fanfare, a law radically restricting the aid America offers to poor families with children — a measure colloquially known as “welfare reform.” The event was the culmination of a backlash that had been growing for three decades, and reflected an even deeper change in Americans’ sense of communal responsibility and what it means to be an American. The long-building anger at some of our most powerless people had finally boiled over — ironically, on the watch of a Democratic president.

President Clinton buttressed his action with the words of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. “Work,” RFK had said, “is the meaning of what this country is all about. We need it as individuals. We need to sense it in our fellow citizens. And we need it as a society and as a people.”

I was then serving President Clinton as an assistant secretary of Health and Human Services, and had been Kennedy’s legislative assistant. I knew both men well. I knew what Kennedy envisioned was a national investment to assure that people actually had jobs. I knew that he also wanted to assure a decent measure of help for people unable to find work, and especially for their

children. He wanted concrete help for all those having trouble getting by. He wanted to do something serious about poverty.

President Clinton hijacked RFK's words and twisted them totally. Instead of assuring jobs and a safety net, Clinton and the Republican Congress invited states to order people to work or else, even if there are no jobs, and with no regard for what happens to them or their children. In the postwelfare world, no cash help has to be offered to parents who fail to find work, even when they are wholly without fault. By signing the bill Clinton signaled acquiescence in the conservative premise that welfare *is* the problem — the source of a “culture” of irresponsible behavior.

President Clinton's misuse of Robert Kennedy's words highlighted a stark difference between the two young leaders. One pressed for social justice whenever he could. The other, originally projecting a commitment to renewing national idealism, ended up governing mainly according to the lowest common denominator. A proper invocation of RFK would have brought us full circle to a new commitment. Instead we completed a U-turn.

I have watched the changing course of our attitudes from close range. In a small way, I have continued the journey Robert Kennedy was not allowed to finish. I had been headed to Wall Street before I went to work for him, but after he was assassinated that path no longer seemed right for me. Newly married to my wonderful wife, Marian, with her own passion for justice, which has brought her from the civil rights movement in Mississippi to the Children's Defense Fund, I decided to pursue my personal memorial to Robert Kennedy by carrying on in his spirit.

That my life should concern itself so much with the question of why we respond so unsatisfactorily to the poorest among us was unimaginable to me growing up in Minneapolis in the fifties. My father, whom I adored as a child, was a successful lawyer and a decent, community-spirited man, and my mother, who died of colon cancer when I was fifteen, was a smart, shy, musical woman

who mistrusted country clubs and wealth. I had an instinctive but undeveloped liberalism derived from my father's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party politics and from being Jewish in a historically anti-Semitic city. I went to public school and Hebrew school and heard often about the great-grandfather for whom I was named, a great rabbi and mystical healer in Russia. I no doubt knew poor people in school, but I didn't know they were poor. In a city that was then 3 percent black, the only people of color I met were my father's two black colleagues on the Mayor's Council on Human Relations and the black student who transferred into the class behind me at West High School (and was soon elected class president).

My parents encouraged me to get good grades and play the clarinet. My father occasionally took me to hearings and community meetings, but he never stressed much of anything besides getting all "A"s. (The clarinet part came from my mother.) I ran for student offices, but I think my main reason for doing so was to gain certification that I wasn't a nerd. When I went away to Harvard in 1954, my father's only advice was not to join anything, it being the heyday of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

I did get good grades, and ended up serving as a Supreme Court law clerk, which led to the Justice Department and to Robert Kennedy. Something besides career development must have driven me, but I wouldn't have been able to articulate it.

The almost four years that I worked for Robert Kennedy changed everything. This was the formative professional relationship of my life. Like many who experienced so much so quickly in the sixties, I was not the same person at age thirty that I had been at twenty-five. I had been shaped by witnessing injustice in the company of a man who constantly sought it out and tried to right it. His passion to make a difference left a permanent mark. If there was a specific time when the mark became indelible, it occurred a year before he was murdered, when, in Mississippi

with him to build support for the War on Poverty, I saw children starving in this rich country and at the same time met my wife-to-be.

I've tried to keep at it. At the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, where I was deputy director, we created a fellowship for young people to work in low-income communities. As a vice president at the University of Massachusetts I pressed for a College of Public and Community Service, university courses in the prisons, care by doctors from the medical school for mentally retarded people in state institutions, academic credit for students who did community service in poor neighborhoods, and admission of minority students to the medical school. As director of the New York State Division for Youth, my focus, which became controversial, was on improving the life chances of the disadvantaged young people enmeshed in the juvenile justice system. At Georgetown University Law Center my teaching and writing have mainly concentrated on poverty, as did my work in the Clinton administration and for Democratic candidates for office over the years.

When Bill Clinton was elected president I thought we had a chance to move forward. I had known him almost fifteen years and his wife, Hillary, almost twenty-five, and I thought I understood him. They were both friends (Hillary more than the President), and Hillary had chaired my wife Marian's board at the Children's Defense Fund. I knew his politics were more centrist than mine. Marian and I had seen him lobby to limit Medicaid expansion in the late eighties, increase state discretion in the welfare legislation of 1988, and weaken the child care legislation of 1990. I recognized that the times were more conservative, and that the deficit inherited from Presidents Reagan and Bush made money for new or expanded programs scarce.

Nonetheless, I thought this intelligent and articulate young man would project an idealism that would inspire the country, especially young people. Things started out pretty well. It was

wonderful to see how many young people had worked in his campaign and then joined the administration, although their numbers had dwindled by the time he left office. And he did appoint, and keep, a number of top people who worked hard to be a good influence.

The day after Clinton was inaugurated, I found myself walking into the Old Executive Office Building for the first time in many years for a meeting of a small group charged with fleshing out Clinton's national-service proposal. It was exciting, and I was happy to accept a position as counselor to Donna Shalala, the secretary of Health and Human Services. When Clinton made some moves with which I disagreed, I initially accepted them as probably necessary if unfortunate exceptions to his prevailing direction. But during the first two years there were also many positive things. I had the privilege of working on some of them, and I felt good about it.

The second Clinton presidency began in 1995 after the Democrats lost Congress. The Clinton who emerged from the ashes of that disaster was different. He had already acquired a reputation for timidity and wobbling, especially in abandoning proposed appointees who ran into rough seas. He had already disappointed many by failing to persevere in some of his own positive efforts, as in the case of the health care fiasco. But the second Clinton acquired a deserved reputation for governing by polls, press releases, and Rose Garden events. The second Clinton told donors he thought he had raised their taxes too much. The second Clinton proved that his own political survival was more important to him than any substantive issue.

Clinton had a chance to make things better. He was a brilliant man in some ways. He was a gifted and inspiring speaker. Yet he never made full use of his many talents in a consistently positive direction, and brought obloquy on the presidency by his personal behavior.

I resigned from the administration to protest the new welfare

law. I was shocked when Clinton decided to sign it. He had previously signaled a willingness to sign a bill freeing the states from any obligation to help anyone and imposing an arbitrary time limit on receiving welfare besides, but the version before him was even broader — especially in its failure to protect children, its harsh effects on legal immigrants, and its deep cuts in the food stamp program. I had thought he would seize on those features as the basis for a veto.

My decision to resign was easy in one way and difficult in others. My visceral reaction to this fundamental break with the long-standing commitment of the Democratic Party to protect poor children was the simple part. I didn't need a long analysis to figure out how I felt. But I had great respect for Secretary Shalala and my other colleagues at HHS who were not going to resign (although two others — Mary Jo Bane and Wendell Primus — did resign). And there is not much of a tradition in America of resigning in protest.

Wanting to make our point but not jeopardize Clinton's reelection, Mary Jo and I (Wendell had left a couple of weeks earlier) sought no publicity. I was astonished at the attention we received. Our action resonated with many people around the country, which made it seem all the more worthwhile.

I was out of the country when Clinton signed the bill, so I did not hear him quote Kennedy. I heard about it later from Rory Kennedy, Robert and Ethel Kennedy's last child, who was born after his death in 1968. She wrote me in outrage about Clinton's twisting of her father's meaning, which, she said, had the effect of "bastardizing, in my opinion, his name and legacy."

The irony is, Bill Clinton could have learned something real from Robert Kennedy. Robert Kennedy was the first "new" Democrat, the first to espouse values of grassroots empowerment and express doubts about big bureaucratic approaches, the first to call for partnerships between the private and public sectors and insist that what we now call civic renewal is essential, the first to

put particular emphasis on personal responsibility. But Robert Kennedy differed from those who now call themselves “new” Democrats, because he also insisted on national policy, national leadership, and national funding to help empower people at the bottom and address other pressing issues. His work and his views were prescient. It is still not too late to learn from them.

Robert Kennedy was uncomfortable when anyone called him a liberal — in fact, when anyone tried to put any label on him. Yet his politics did not resemble the abdication of responsibility and commitment that characterizes too many of today’s “new” Democrats. There could be no doubt of his passion for justice. This, combined with a commitment to results and a highly original mind, produced a view of government and of remedies for powerless people different from that of Bill Clinton.

RFK also rejected the liberal label because he saw what traditional liberalism had brought us: a domino-theory logic that, in the Vietnam War, killed tens of thousands of Americans and more than a million Asians for reasons that became harder to discern with each passing month; a paternalism toward the poor at home and poorer nations abroad that promoted neither individual strength nor national competence; and a rigidity in large institutions that closed ears and minds to fresh ideas and challenges.

What I would call Robert Kennedy’s new progressivism is largely absent from our politics now. Even during a long period of aggregate prosperity (for which President Clinton deserves some credit), Americans have been deeply cynical. Our attitudes toward the most powerless reflect this. Richer than any nation in history, we think of the poor as culturally deficient and rush to blame them for the circumstances in which they find themselves. We jump to the conclusion that they could earn a reasonable share of the national pie if they would only try. We fail to challenge the amazing proposition, put forward by radicals of the Right, that if we would only stop helping the poor they would be better off.

America's poor are like the homeless man we pass sitting against a building. We give him our loose change but he is still there, every day. He looks no better off despite our largesse. Exasperated, we stop seeing him and step past as though he were not there, and we never ask why he was homeless in the first place. And, concentrating our enmity on those we classify as poor, we obscure the problems of millions of others who, working as hard as they can, continually fall short of making even a minimally adequate income.

The backdrop of the last thirty years features a vicious circle of injurious economic change, national tragedy, and negative politics. People were disillusioned by the additive effects of the assassinations of revered leaders, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the changes in the economy. Many blamed government for not stemming the disappearance of good jobs and the damaging combination of inflation and high unemployment in the late seventies. Millions lost economic ground. People either stopped voting or voted for the candidate who said the best government was the one that was closest to no government, except for the military. With voters opting out in droves, special interests had even more power to use their money to get what they wanted. Gaps in wealth, income, and power widened. Spurts of positive policy, especially in the early seventies, brought strengthened protections without which those at the lower end would be in even deeper trouble today, but the declines in real wages and the failure of public policies to compensate nonetheless left the bottom worse off.

The public view of the poor turned nasty. People working two or three jobs to survive were told that their problems were caused by those below them on the economic ladder. Clinton could sign a bill endangering millions of children and still get re-elected handily, by a combination of people who agreed with him and people who didn't but thought the prospect of Bob Dole, Newt



Gingrich, and Trent Lott running the country was even worse. (I was a member of the latter group. Disappointed as I am in Clinton, I have never believed that worse is better. Clinton was always fortunate in the quality of the enemies he attracted.)

The welfare system we had in place until 1996 badly needed reform, just as Robert Kennedy had said thirty years earlier. It left too many on the welfare rolls for too long, and did not help people find jobs and escape poverty. It was never an antipoverty program, although it did assure some cash income for families with children. But the new law was not real reform. It did not remove the barriers to self-sufficiency and it did not protect children. It freed the states to push people off the welfare rolls regardless of the consequences. What President Clinton signed was not a responsible policy but an abdication of responsibility.

We have been told repeatedly, by the White House and others, that the new law is a smashing success. In fact, while a few states have used it positively and more people are working, many formerly on welfare are worse off, even during unprecedented prosperity. The welfare rolls have been cut in half, but that is less than half the story.

A few numbers reveal what the public relations juggernaut obscures. Of the 7-million-plus people who have left welfare, 2.5 million are adults, mostly women. Nationally, about 60 percent of those have jobs at any given time. This means that about 1.5 million have jobs and about 1 million don't. Those million people and their children add up to 3 million people. That is a big number.

Where are they? We don't know precisely. They are truly America's "disappeared." Why did they leave welfare without a job? Mostly because they were kicked off, and in some places because they hit time limits. Many left for a job, lost it, couldn't find another, reapplied for welfare, and were turned away because of Catch-22 policies that tell people to look for work that