# JAMES T. PATTERSON

## America's Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century

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*In memory of my wife, Nancy*
*1937–1980*


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# Preface, 2000

In the nearly six years since the publication of the last edition of this book, the American economy has roared ahead at almost unimaginable rates of growth, thereby opening up millions of new jobs and reducing dramatically the percentage of people living in poverty. The new chapter for this edition, entitled "The Amazing 1990s," highlights these extraordinarily encouraging economic trends.

These years also witnessed another dramatic development: congressional approval in 1996 of welfare reform that abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with a system of federal block grants to states. States, in turn, were expected to develop their own policies to move recipients off of welfare and into the world of work. Partly because of economic growth and partly because of the reform, the number of Americans on welfare fell precipitously over the next four years. The long-range effects of the law, however, remain both uncertain and debated. The new chapter focuses on the impact thus far of this historic revision of the nation's welfare system—a change that has sparked enormous controversy among scholars, welfare administrators, and recipients.

I thank two able research assistants, both graduate students at Brown University, Robert Fleegler and Andrew Huebner, for their considerable help in preparing this new edition.

# Preface, 1994

This third revision reflects my continuing belief that poverty in the United States is not only a major concern—perhaps the biggest the nation faces—but also a source of angry controversy which reveals much about American culture and politics. For these reasons I have added a chapter that explores developments affecting the struggle against poverty in the United States between 1985 and early 1994.

The title of this new chapter, "Welfare Reform: No Consensus," hints at my interpretation of this struggle: a major overhaul of the nation's welfare system—and alleviation of poverty—proved elusive in the decade after 1985. Poverty, indeed, deepened in the early 1990s. Americans grew increasingly agitated about the "underclasses," the breakup of families, illegitimacy, welfare dependency, and crime. Liberals who warred against poverty fought historically powerful attitudes that resisted providing welfare to the "undeserving." They also confronted formidable fiscal, political, and institutional barriers to welfare reform, however defined. Still, these were also years of fascinating debates concerning the sources of poverty and the programs to combat it. If there was no consensus, the arguments nonetheless were more vital and serious than they had been in the late 1970s and early 1980s. My notes identify the range of these discussions and may lead readers to new conclusions of their own.

My thanks go to several experts who answered my last-minute calls for criticism and read drafts of my chapter: Steven Gillon of Brown University, Eugene Smolensky of the University of California, Berkeley, David Rochefort of Northeastern University, Edward Berkowitz of George Washington University, Lowell Gallaway of Ohio University, Jason DeParle of the *New York Times,* and William Galston, Office of the Assistant to the President.

# Preface, 1985

When I wrote the earlier edition of this book, I was pleased to be able to carry the story of poverty and welfare in modern American history to 1980. At that time it seemed that 1980 marked a logical stopping point. The subject of poverty had ceased to be of much popular concern. The Great Society programs of the 1960s were undergoing sustained assault from conservatives, who pronounced those policies counterproductive. Confirming the conservative mood, Ronald Reagan swept to victory in the 1980 election. It appeared unlikely that the problem of poverty would soon recapture the attention of most Americans.

In the five years between 1980 and 1985, however, poverty again became a source of considerable discussion and controversy, in part because the Reagan administration continued to assail various aspects of the welfare state. His rhetoric and that of other conservatives placed liberals on the defensive and sparked renewed debate over social policy.

Two other developments did still more to make poverty and welfare controversial in the 1980s. First, the recession of 1980–1982 had a severe and lasting impact on poor people, whose numbers greatly increased, from approximately 26 million in 1979 to 35.5 million by 1983. Economic gains after 1983 reduced these numbers only slightly, to 33.7 million in 1984. This striking deterioration between 1979 and 1983 naturally provoked new concern for the plight of the poor in the United States. Second, many Americans became much alarmed in the 1980s about the rise of a so-called underclass of mostly black and Hispanic school dropouts, hustlers, criminals, dope addicts, welfare mothers, and (most numerous) long-term or permanently unemployed people. Their numbers and, more important, their behavior frightened conservatives and liberals, blacks and whites alike.

The return of concern about poverty to the front pages of the newspapers and magazines prompted me to look again at the subject, and convinced me to write a brief new chapter bringing my history to the mid-1980s. That addition necessitated altering the title of the book and changing the epilogue to

Chapter 13. Otherwise, this edition is unchanged from the version published in 1981.

As my notes reveal, the new chapter depends heavily on newspaper and magazine articles published since 1980, and especially on publications sponsored by the Institute for Research on Poverty. This organization, originally funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), produces from its base at the University of Wisconsin at Madison many up-to-date and carefully researched papers and articles on a range of subjects relating to poverty. The IRP sponsored an important conference in December 1984 at Williamsburg, Virginia, featuring leading writers on poverty; their papers have proved of great value to me. I thank Aida Donald, Harvard University Press, for suggesting that I update this book. I also thank Steven Gillon of Yale University, Peter Gottschalk of Bowdoin College, John Dittmer of Depauw University, Sheldon Danziger and Eugene Smolensky of the University of Wisconsin, George Bass of Brown University, and Hugh Heclo of Harvard University, all of whom offered constructive comments on drafts of this chapter.

# Preface, 1981

When I began to explore the history of poverty and welfare in the United States, I was struck by the number of good books that might still be written. No historian had yet published a broad demographic history of the poor, a social history of poor people, or a synthetic study of the changing causes of poverty in the United States. My book touches on these matters but makes no claim to being comprehensive.

My focus, rather, resembles that of Robert Bremner's account of attitudes toward poverty prior to 1920, *From the Depths*. Like him, I am interested in exploring changing perspectives, especially of reformers, toward poverty and welfare. Unlike him, I largely ignore artists and novelists, and I focus on the twentieth century, mainly the period after 1930. Because these were years of increasing governmental involvement in social welfare, my book tries to integrate intellectual history and analysis of public policy. It attempts to show how popular views of poverty, prescriptions of reformers, and governmental programs have affected poor Americans during these years. To the degree that sources permit, it places the American experience within the context of international developments and depicts what poor people themselves thought of efforts on their behalf.

Several main themes recur in this history. These include the persistence of attitudes popular among the middle classes: that many, if not most, of the destitute are undeserving; that large numbers of poor people exist in an intergenerational "culture of poverty"; that social insurance is preferable to welfare, which is wasteful and demoralizing; that wise public policy seeks to prevent destitution, not to provide income maintenance; that work, not welfare, is the essence of the meaningful life.

But these popular attitudes have not always shaped policy. Among the other forces that have resulted in the developing welfare state are demographic change: the aging of the population, mass movements from farm to city, the rise in the number of broken families. Other forces are political and institutional: the accelerating nationalization of politics after 1933, the growing power of pressure groups such as the aged, and the bureaucratic expan-

sion of established public programs. Perhaps most important have been economic forces, which have influenced attitudes and policies in very different ways. In the Depression of the 1930s, economic catastrophe called for new responses; in times of great prosperity, confidence in the future has tended to stimulate the "discovery" of poverty and more generous public responses to the poor.

Pursuing these themes, I chase a more ambitious goal: to explore how and why Americans, especially authorities on poverty and welfare, have (and have not) changed their fundamental assumptions about the good society during the industrial and postindustrial age. In this effort I build on R. H. Tawney's observation that "there is no touchstone, except the treatment of childhood, which reveals the true character of a social philosophy more clearly than the spirit in which it regards the misfortunes of those of its members who fall by the way" (*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* [New York, 1926], p. 268). Like Tawney, I think that attitudes and policies toward poor people, important in themselves, provide clues about broader "social philosophies"—popular and otherwise—of the nation.

In searching for these social philosophies, I have divided the book into four parts chronologically, using dates—1930, 1960, 1965—that marked shifts in the social thought of experts on poverty and welfare. The first part discusses the drive for "prevention" that motivated reformers prior to 1930. The second concerns the Depression and the rudimentary welfare state that developed in the next two decades. At that time, many Americans continued to yearn for prevention—a constant theme—and to hope that poverty would soon "wither away." The third part concentrates on the rediscovery of poverty in the early 1960s and the subsequent war on it. Though the assumptions and goals of this war were different from those of the 1930s, it continued to emphasize prevention, this time in the guise of expanding "opportunity." The fourth part deals with the extraordinary developments in social welfare that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, years of little-noticed but virtually revolutionary changes in welfare. The 1960s, I think, marked a sharp break with the past in many aspects of social policy. Chapter 13 discusses the stalemate over welfare reform that characterized the mid- and late 1970s.

Like most broad historical studies, this one risks overgeneralization. Phrases such as "the poor" or "middle-class attitudes" may obscure considerable differences within such groups and in so doing underplay the importance of cultural divisions in American society. Focusing on "the poor" may also exaggerate the differences that distinguish them from near-poor working people. I use "may" here because historians do not really know enough yet to make very solid statements differentiating the values and life-styles of various

groups of poor people from those of the middle and upper classes. I try to make generalizations about "the poor" only with caution.

Readers will note that I am trying to write history, not a guide to welfare reform in the future. For that reason I have resisted the advice of some friends who urged that any book on this subject must explain where the story will end. I wish I knew.

The notes list many scholars whose research made it possible for me to write this book. I am also indebted to Donald Spaeth, John S. Gilkeson, and Stephanie Gardner, all of Brown University, who typed the manuscript. The following scholars assisted me greatly by reading earlier drafts: Robert McElwaine of Millsaps College (chapters three and four), Robert Plotnick of the Institute for Research on Poverty (chapters ten through thirteen), and John Gilkeson, who ably criticized the entire manuscript. Stephan Thernstrom of Harvard University and Robert Bremner of Ohio State University read the whole manuscript and saved me from many errors. Edward Berkowitz of the President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties and Carl Brauer of the University of Virginia gave earlier drafts especially careful attention and induced me to make many necessary changes. I owe a debt also to my colleague John L. Thomas of Brown University, whose expert eye helped transform a bunch of chapters into a book. Winifred Barton and Karen Mota performed countless secretarial tasks for me, usually with good humor. Peg Anderson of Harvard Press did an excellent job of editing. I thank especially Nancy's family, whose support during very difficult times made the book possible: Dr. David and Ruth Weeks, Robert and Ruth Clark, Rich and Barbara Miner. My children, Steve and Marnie, inspired me to persist.

# America's Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century

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# I

# The Preventive Impulse
## 1900–1930

# 1

# Snapshots of the Poor

SETTLEMENT HOUSE WORKERS, muckraking journalists, and social reformers sang a monotonous dirge about poverty in the half century before the Great Depression of the 1930s. That dirge repeated a powerful and recurrent theme—that poor people suffered mainly from weaknesses in the economy, not from moral flaws. A few examples from this litany suffice:

*Low Wages, New York City, 1890:* There were nine in the family: husband, wife, an aged grandmother, and six children; honest, hard-working Germans, scrupulously neat, but poor. All nine lived in two rooms, one about ten feet square that served as parlor, bedroom, and eating room, the other a small hall-room made into a kitchen. The rent was seven dollars and a half a month, more than a week's wages for the husband and father, who was the only bread-winner in the family. That day the mother had thrown herself out of the window, and was carried up from the street dead. She was "discouraged," said some of the other women of the tenement.

*Women's Work, 1890:* Here is the case of a woman employed in the manufacturing department of a Broadway house. It stands for a hundred like her own. She averages three dollars a week. Pays $1.50 for her room; for breakfast she has a cup of coffee; lunch she cannot afford. One meal a day is her allowance. This woman is young, she is pretty. She has "the world before her." Is it anything less than a miracle if she is found guilty of nothing worse than the "early and improvident marriage" against which moralists exclaim as one of the prolific causes of the distress of the poor? Almost any door might seem to offer welcome escape from such slavery as this.

*"Sweating" in Tenements, 1905:* The workers, poor, helpless, ignorant foreigners, work on in dirt, often in filth unspeakable, in the presence of all contagious and other diseases, and in apartments in which the sun en-