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January 1992

THE SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME PROGRAM

Social Security Administration
Office of Supplemental Security Income
SSA Pub. No. 17-002

Box 296

Richard W. Porter
Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff
Personal/Political/Issues

- State of the Union
- Super Fund Liability For Banks
- Johnson City, TN 3/4/92
- Texas
- Term limits
- Texas 3/5/92
- Tort Reform
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- V.P. Personal List
- Washington 11/9/91
- Welfare Data Backup
- Yeltsin Arrival
- Wisconsin 4/6/92
- Woodson File
- Zapata Oil
- President Growth Package (Treasury Info.)

What Should We Do About the Poor?

The following editorial appears in the April issue of *First Things*, a monthly published by the New York-based Institute on Religion and Public Life.

Some will protest that the question posed by that title is outrageously wrong-headed. To ask what we should do about the poor, they say, smacks of paternalism and noblesse oblige, reflecting a hierarchical mentality in which the world is divided between "us" and "them." Rather, they would instruct us, the question is whether we "identify" with the poor, who are the victims of injustice perpetrated by those of us who are not poor.

From the other end of the political spectrum we are also told that our question is wrong. There it is said that the real question is, What *can* we do about the poor? According to many conservatives, the answer is: little or nothing. It is pointed out that a bloated and bureaucratic welfare system, on which government is now spending \$184 billion per year, has only exacerbated the problems of poverty.

The Great Divide

That, in broad strokes, is the great divide in public discussions of what is to be done about poverty. The divide generally follows the lines of what are described as liberal and conservative. The liberals are at a distinct disadvantage. The equation between compassion and increased government expenditure is increasingly unappealing.

If the conventional liberal solutions are bankrupt, we must also view with some anxiety alternative answers that are being proposed. Some conservatives pride themselves on boldly biting the bullet when they call for the shock therapy of cutting off welfare benefits altogether. This is sometimes called the "cold turkey" answer to the welfare mess. It has the modest virtue of being simple and dramatic, but we expect it is not politically viable, and a good thing too. The moral sensibilities of Americans are, however confusedly, formed by a biblical teaching that is concerned about the plight of the poor. The call to be compassionate is not an invention of contemporary liberalism.

Americans more and more realize that they have, over many years, been lied to about poverty, and they don't like it one bit. In the past 30 years, trillions of tax dollars have been spent on "helping the poor," with the result, they are told, that there are more poor people than ever. It is little wonder that, in our political vocabulary, compassion is becoming a dirty word. When voters hear a politician mention compassion, they reach for their pocket books — not to give but to make sure they are still there.

Popular fatigue is intensified by mendacious statements about the dimensions of poverty in America. According to the Census Bureau, more than 30 million Americans are living in poverty. The official poverty line is a cash income of \$12,675 for a family of four or \$10,419 for a family of three. But consider a few items culled from a recent and much discussed study by the Heritage Foundation.

Thirty-eight percent of persons classified as poor own their own homes. The median value of these homes is \$39,200, or 58% of the median value of all homes owned by Americans. Nearly half a million

"poor" persons own homes worth over \$100,000, and 36,000 "poor" persons own homes worth over \$300,000. Sixty-two percent of "poor" households own a car, and 14% own two or more cars. Nearly half of all "poor" households have air conditioning, and 31% have microwave ovens. Poor people on average consume the same level of vitamins, minerals, and protein as do middle-class folk, and poor children actually eat more meat and protein than do their middle-class peers.

Keep in mind that poverty is defined by reported cash income. That does not include income from what is politely called the informal economy. Moreover, the government's own data show that low-income households spend \$1.94 for every one dollar of income reported. That is because the official poverty definition does not include non-cash, in-kind assistance such as food stamps, housing subsidies and Medicaid. If all welfare benefits are included, the government is spending over \$11,120 on every "poor" family in America.

Government reports make clear that most "poor" Americans today are better housed, better fed and own more personal

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property than average U.S. citizens throughout most of this century. After adjusting for inflation, the per-capita expenditures of the lowest-income one-fifth of the U.S. population today exceed the per-capita income of the median American household in 1955.

The real crisis of poverty in America is related less to income than to behavior, less to economics than to culture. The real crisis is the underclass, a mainly urban population isolated from mainstream patterns of opportunity and responsibility. For them, the welfare system is more the problem than the solution. Not only work habits but the most elementary patterns of family and child-rearing have been destroyed.

In the 1950s, nearly one-third of poor families were headed by adults who worked full time. That figure today is 16%. Even using the Census Bureau's skewed definition of poverty, only 5.6% of married-couple families are today "living in poverty." In 1959, 28% of poor families with children were headed by women. Today, more than 60% of poor families with children are headed by single mothers. In the 1960s, the black illegitimate birth rate was 25%. Today, nearly two out of three black children are born out of wedlock.

Because the reality of the underclass has to do mainly with culture and patterns of personal behavior, what government can do to help is limited. Policy experts fiddle with incentives and disincentives in the welfare system, and some states are

conducting experiments in linking benefits to work and job training. While they are perhaps modest steps in the right direction, these things have been tried before, to little avail.

The one thing government should be able to do is effective policing of the neighborhoods of the poor. But law and order is hardly the whole answer. The cultural and moral efforts required to reconstruct the ethic of work, lawful behavior and family responsibility in our inner cities lie outside the competence of government. Parental authority and habits of self-reliance must be strengthened, and, for the most part, the only available institutions for taking the lead in these tasks are churches.

Black and Hispanic churches may seem like a very weak reed on which to lean, and they are that. But they are usually the only indigenous institutions on the scene. Regrettably, many inner-city clergy are still content to serve as a clique for a superannuated civil rights establishment that knows how to do little more than make demands for additional government funds. However, a growing number of inner-city clergy are preaching a different message. They call upon their people to take moral charge of their own lives.

Does this mean that the rest of us are let off the hook? The answer is emphatically negative. Policy changes are required to empower poor people to break out of dependency. One such change is school choice — a simple demand of justice that will give poor parents and children the same opportunities and responsibilities taken for granted by most other Americans.

Genuine reform requires a careful rethinking of attitudes and policies across the board. Peter F. Drucker urges that the time has long since come to recognize that "government has proved itself incompetent at solving social problems." The answer, wrote Mr. Drucker in an article in *The Wall Street Journal*, is to look to the voluntary organizations. Giving the lie to all the talk about compassion fatigue, voluntarism is breaking out all over. There are now some 90 million Americans — one out of every two adults — working as volunteers in nonprofits for an average of three hours a week.

Mr. Drucker's analysis finds its philosophical and theological counterpart in the teachings of Pope John Paul II. In his recent encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, the Pope lifts up the importance of "intermediate institutions" — what some social thinkers in this country call the "mediating structures" — of family, church, and voluntary associations. He places severe strictures on the role of the state in social welfare — a role that, he says, inevitably leads to bureaucratization, depersonalization and dependency.

Statist Control

Of course, all such reformist proposals are vehemently resisted by those who have a vested interest in statist control of social programs. Witness the desperate opposition of the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers to school choice.

Even leaders of the nonprofits betray a hostility to reform. A newspaper interviews an official of Catholic Charities who acknowledges that there has been a remarkable upsurge in the number of donations and volunteers for the organization's work with the homeless, drug addicts and others in need. The Monsignor is not happy about this development. "This reflects a failure of government," he says. "In a more just society, these needs would be handled through government programs." The notion that voluntary response to human need is a stopgap measure until the government can be persuaded to take over is deeply and tragically entrenched.

The American people are not indifferent to the question, "What should we do about the poor?" But they could become indifferent, or worse, if politicians, journalists, policy experts and preachers continue to lie to them. There is no compassion fatigue. There is an ominous and growing mendacity fatigue.