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The “War on Poverty” and “Welfare Reform”: A Comparative Discourse
Analysis of Elite Newspaper Editorial Coverage in 1964 and 1996

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Urban Studies

by

Laura Lynn Mogg

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Abstract

From the time of the “war on poverty,” of 1964, to the era of “welfare reform” in 1990s, the federal welfare system underwent a change from a model that acted to protect citizens from the vagaries of the market economy to one that mandated their participation in the paid labor force. For a shift in policy of this magnitude to occur and be unquestioningly accepted by the public, a significant change also had to occur in how poverty and welfare issues were discussed and perceived over the intervening years.

Using discourse analysis, this study examines how editorials in elite newspapers framed the issues of poverty and welfare in the months prior to the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act (1964) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996). It also addresses how newspaper editorials influenced public perception about the nature and causes of poverty and welfare reliance.

Keywords: welfare, welfare reform, poverty, war on poverty, media, Economic Opportunity Act, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act

Introduction

With the passing of the Social Security Act (SSA) in 1935, the federal government of the United States made its first entrée into providing for the public, and specifically economic, welfare of its citizens, more than six years into the devastating Great Depression. At the time of the stock market crash of 1929, “the nation was equipped with the worst welfare system in the western world, a patchwork of voluntary institutions and pinch–penny state and local agencies” (Lawson 2006:9). For President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the SSA programs were intended to “eliminate many of the factors that cause economic depressions” and to “provide the means of mitigating their results” (Mink and Solinger 2003:67). They may also be seen as a way of ensuring his reelection in the face of massive public support for Huey Long and his “Share Our Wealth” program (Piven and Cloward 1971:91). The programs of Social Security—old age insurance, unemployment insurance, and aid to needy mothers with young children—were initially meant to provide economic security against the hazards of American life, hazards that resulted from a market–oriented economic system and that claimed the poor as their victims.

Beginning in the early 1960s, the goals of United States welfare policy changed from a labor protection model to a labor participation model. Those who were experiencing poverty, including women with young children, were expected to assume responsibility for their economic situation by entering the work force. Gone was the idea that the role of even poor women was to stay at home with their children, despite the cost to government. The new paradigm, born of the economic crises of the time as well as a shift to a post–Fordist¹ regime of accumulation, needed, in part, a docile, insecure, low–wage workforce, which was partly enabled

by the evolution of the welfare state to one that obligated its recipients to be employed in the private sector.

As these changes were taking place, political scientists, social theorists, and those in the media were creating *ex post facto* ideological justifications for the new policies. The poor came to be seen as creators of their own problems and their poverty was a result of their rejection of the middle class American values of hard work and personal responsibility. These economic, political, and ideological views were fully realized in the last major federal welfare legislation to date, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

While there has been some discussion in academic literature on the media's influence on public perception of poverty and welfare *after* the changes made to the welfare system during the 1996 "reform" (i.e. Bullock, White, Williams 2001), there exists little literature that focuses on the popular media's role before this time. Specifically absent from the literature was a discussion of newspapers' framing of the problems of poverty and welfare in response to the proposal of either of the two largest legislative initiatives on welfare, the Economic Opportunity Act, and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Scholars recognize that, "News media play a central role in processes of symbolic power through which social issues are defined and solutions legitimized" (Barnett, et.al. 2007:296). The mainstream media's framing of these issues — described as "one of the primary means by which elite's influence citizens' opinions" (Druckman and Nelson 2003:730) — are attempts to legitimate and reinforce elite power.

This thesis aims to analyze how some widely read newspaper editorials constructed the reality of poverty and welfare in America for their readers, as well as how the construction of the problems and appropriate solutions in 1964 and 1996 influenced the shift in public perception

that occurred between those years. A shift in goals of the magnitude that occurred between the EOA and PRWORA could only have occurred if the public's perception of the poverty and welfare were carefully crafted by a force other than direct experience. The media, operating according to Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model (1988), based their coverage on its "serviceability to important domestic power interests," allowing these major redirections in policy to occur with little debate or discussion that put these changes into historical context.

In Chapters One and Two, I review the academic literature to provide a theoretical and historical background for this comparative study. Chapter One traces the economic and political shifts that began in earnest in 1973 and which were overlooked as explanations for growing poverty and welfare rolls. Additionally, I review the most popular works within an explosion of conservative literature from the 1980s, books that used moral arguments to justify the welfare state contractions that were already underway due to the slowed economic growth and inflation of the previous decade. Chapter Two is a brief history of the proposed and actual changes in policy from Presidents Nixon through Clinton.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five explain the method and results of a comparative discourse analysis of the editorials from three major newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*—in the eight months leading up to the passing of the historic 1994 and 1996 legislation. In these chapters I examine the content and implicit assumptions of the editorials as a means of constructing a narrative for readers that both influenced the coming "personal responsibility" paradigm, in the case of 1964, or expanded its reach, as the 1996 sample did. The earlier pieces laid the groundwork by advancing the idea that poverty could be lessened by improving the situations of individuals. When welfare programs failed to reduce

poverty, they were demonized and blamed for the very existence of that poverty by the 1996 writers who advocated policy that made personal responsibility “mandatory.”

I reviewed the sample texts looking for what was identified as the problem with poverty and welfare in the United States, this problem’s cause, and what the government’s ideal role should be in solving the problem. The goal of this analysis was the elucidation of the framing devices used by the media that encouraged the public acceptance of these drastic changes to policy. Following this analytic process, I concluded that the rightward political trajectory that the United States has been on since the 1960s, coupled with a deindustrializing and globalizing economy resulted in the restructuring of the federal welfare system in order to better serve the needs of elite capital interests.

An onslaught of popular neoconservative literature in the 1980s, attempting to justify the changes underway, was, along with the mainstream media, portraying the causes of poverty and welfare dependence as being the failure of the poor to take responsibility for these problems themselves. Readers are left with the view, constructed by the media, that the poor are poor due to their own bad behavior and moral failure and that the welfare system has only encouraged this. By convincing the public of the truth of this image of the poor the major shifts in policy that turned the sixty–one–year–old federal social safety net into a state controlled mandatory work program were allowed to occur virtually unimpeded.

The media

In their study on media images of the poor in New Zealand, Barnett et.al. write,

Consideration of the power of the news media is crucial because news agencies are primary sources of taken–for–granted frameworks for understanding social concerns, and are central to the definitions of social issues and the legitimization of specific approaches

to addressing these issues(Hodgetts, Cullen, & Radley, 2005; Tester, 2001) (Barnett, et.al. 2007:297).

They go on, “Scholars have gone as far as to propose that news coverage is not simply a by-product of policy initiatives but an integral part of how policy is formed and reformed,” in part because of policy makers view news media coverage as reflecting public opinion (297).

In reality, news articles and editorials are more often reflective of elite ideology and the desires of those with power and capital. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky proposed a propaganda model of the media, whereby it operates to inculcate the public with ideology and beliefs that support the power of the elite and the domination of their interests over that of the audience. This is done via five “filters” that are essential to the model: the size and concentrated ownership and wealth of media firms, advertising as primary income, media reliance on government and “expert” sources, “flak” used to discipline the media, and the use of anticommunism as a control mechanism (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Based on this model, Herman and Chomsky anticipate, “In the opinion columns . . . sharp restraints on the range of opinion allowed expression” (1988).

The opinions and “facts” that are published are carefully crafted to elicit the desired response from the public. Even when the media are not explicitly telling the audience what it should believe, they are framing the issues in such a way that there seems to be no alternative but to accept their version of the truth. Druckman and Nelson write, “Framing effects constitute one of the primary means by which elites influence citizens’ opinions . . . emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (Druckman and Nelson 2003:730). Deconstruction and analysis of

media presentations of poverty and welfare are, therefore, vital in understanding both the shift in public opinion and the changes to policy that occurred during the late twentieth century.

Discourse analysis

“Discourse,” writes noted linguist and critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough, “is an element of social life which is dialectically interconnected with other elements, and may have constructive and transformative effects on other elements . . . More general processes of current social change often seem to be initiated and driven by changes in discourse” (Fairclough 2008). Critical discourse analysis, then, is more than just the study of how language is used in a text. It can connect texts to the social world and can reveal evidence of their impact on larger social processes. In this study, critical discourse analysis is used to understand why and how the United States has experienced a significant shift in the late twentieth century in its views on government obligation to the poor, the causes of poverty, and what ideal welfare policy should accomplish as well as how this shift was strengthened by the media’s framing of the issues.

Discourse analysis is one of numerous approaches to the broader methodology of content analysis, which Krippendorff defines as “a repertoire of methods of research that promise to yield inferences from all kinds of verbal, pictorial, symbolic, and communication data” (2004:17). It generally focuses on the manner in which phenomena are represented in a text, particularly in the media (2004:17). While discourse analysis is considered by many to be quantitative in nature, he questions even applying the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy to any content analysis as all readings of texts, even those done using computer algorithms, are influenced by the researcher’s “socially or culturally conditioned understandings” (2004:17).

In this study, I take a qualitative approach to the analysis of newspaper editorials in an effort to know and understand both the explicit and implicit arguments and assumptions that were found in each source. This approach involves “a close reading of relatively small amounts of textual matter” and a “rearticulation of given texts into new (analytical, deconstructive, emancipatory, or critical) narratives . . .” (Krippendorf 2004:17). I read each text individually for its explicit statements and latent meanings and assumptions. Additionally, and more importantly, the texts from each year’s sample were considered together as forming a narrative presented to the public as the comprehensive truth about poverty and welfare.

Why the EOA and the PRWORA?

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) were chosen as the subjects of this study because the differences between the policies encapsulate the ideologies surrounding poverty and government provision of welfare that were so influenced by the economic and political landscapes at the time of their enactment. The differences between these two policies, and the arguments that were given both for and against them, reflect the vast changes that occurred in the media portrayal, and therefore popular perception, of the causes of poverty, the value of any and all work, and the need for federal government provided welfare and poverty assistance in the United States in the years between the war on poverty and welfare reform.

Both the EOA and PRWORA were signed into law by Democratic presidents during times of relative economic prosperity. President Johnson noted in 1964 that the United States was the “richest and most fortunate nation in the history of the world” (Mink and Solinger 2003:223). Under President Clinton, more than 20 million jobs were created, real median income rose, and poverty, unemployment, and inflation were down (President William J.

Clinton: Eight Years of Peace, Progress, and Prosperity). Additionally, the hope for both of these policies was the eventual employment of welfare recipients in private sector jobs. The responsibility for, and method of achieving, this is what differed so vastly.

In introducing the EOA to the nation in his State of the Union address in January of 1964, Johnson repeatedly stressed the obligation of the nation as a whole, but especially the federal government and executive branch, to ensure the well being of all citizens. “The Congress,” he said, “is charged by the Constitution to ‘provide . . . for the general welfare of the United States.’ Our present abundance is a measure of its success in fulfilling that duty. Now Congress is being asked to extend that welfare to all our people . . . this office also holds a special responsibility to the distressed and disinherited, the hungry and hopeless of this abundant Nation” (Mink and Solinger 2003:225). In this introductory speech was recognition of the structural barriers to economic well being that the poor faced. Lack of education, ill health and inadequate health care, and racial injustice specifically were mentioned as probable causes of poverty that needed remediation if the long term goal of poverty eradication was to be attained (Mink and Solinger 2003:224). These inequalities would require an affirmative effort on the part of the federal government to provide equal opportunity access to quality schooling, job training, and public sector service positions, as well as the involvement of the poor in creating their own plans for local poverty eradication via Community Action Agencies.

What the EOA aimed to do was to move people from poverty, and the welfare rolls, simply by giving them the opportunity for individual advancement. It recognized larger institutionalized barriers such as racism, but its solutions focused mainly on the individual, and assisting the victims of poverty at personal skill enhancement in the hope that a well-educated poor person could move him or herself up the economic ladder. The legislation did this by

attempting to “empower the poor” through the establishment of a Job Corps for high school drop-outs, a domestic public service corps called VISTA, and Operation Head Start which provided preschool education for impoverished children (Trattner 1999:322.)

While these initiatives were “supposed to enhance the productive ability of the needy and facilitate their transition from welfare to work,” (Trattner 1999:323) they were not tied to time limits on benefits or any requirement to work or look for work at all. The initiation of this war on poverty was more the embarrassed reaction of a prosperous nation to the discovery of abject poverty in its midst, and not the angered reaction of a middle class to the “lazy poor” and “welfare cheats” that should be required to work. These programs were offering merely the opportunity to be better prepared for private sector work. Despite the ongoing debate about whether or not the EOA programs were effective or even fully implemented, Katz argues that they, “greatly extended the role and responsibilities of the federal government and altered the relations between citizens and the state” (1996:266). This expansion of federal means-tested welfare programs, occurring prior to the economic and political shifts that began in earnest in 1973, would be the last expansion of assistance to and programs for the “able-bodied” poor to date and the only major new policy of its sort to be signed until 1996.

Mink and Solinger claim that it was in the early 1970s, with the 1960s identified as a decade of liberal policy, that, “Instead of defining poverty as a quantitatively measured standard of need, policy experts and public opinion more often defined poverty as a measureable tax burden on the middle class” (2003:337) Poverty resulted from a result of “slothfully missed opportunities,” not blocked opportunities (2003:337). More than two decades later this attitude towards poverty inspired Clinton’s promise to “end welfare as we know it.” PRWORA was the compromise between Clinton and Congress after a number of welfare reform bills were rejected

by one or the other. Though he signed this final version into law, Clinton claimed to “strongly disagree with a couple of provisions,” though these contested provisions “have nothing to do with the fundamental purpose of welfare reform” (Mink and Solinger 2003:660). That stated purpose was fourfold: to provide assistance to needy families to allow children to be cared for in their own homes, to end dependence on the government by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage, to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancy and to encourage the maintenance of two-parent families (Mink and Solinger 2003:645).

Most importantly, the Act set forth a new relationship between the federal government, states and welfare recipients and officially ended the sixty-one year entitlement of any individual to poverty assistance benefits. Welfare programs were from then on to be established by each state and would be funded by an absolute block grant and not on a shared funding plan based on numbers of recipients. States were incentivized to cut rolls in order to reduce their own welfare expenditures. One of the most significant new rules a state had to abide by to receive its grant requires all recipients to engage in “work” (as defined by the State) and limited assistance to 24 consecutive months and 60 months over the course of a lifetime. This federal law leaves the specifics of job creation and compliance with work requirements in state control. No additional funds were appropriated for this purpose and states are expected to pay for these work programs with the money saved by reducing the number of those receiving cash assistance.

Both the EOA and the PRWORA are acts of legislation that profess a desire to move welfare recipients from government dependence into economic self-sufficiency. Yet they do so in distinct ways that are indicative of the social, political, and economic milieu of their times. In studying these particular pieces of legislation, and the public debate prior to their becoming law,

the profound ideological shift that occurred over the intervening 30 years, and the media's role in furthering that shift becomes even more evident.

While the specific research questions and methodology for this study were formulated to best gather information from this particular sampling of data, the greater aim was to seek answers to some of the larger questions that surround the current discourse on poverty in the American media and, by extension, among the public. This discourse, I theorize, led to Americans' quiet acceptance of policies that fundamentally changed the purpose of the United States' welfare state. When did it become commonly accepted that many of the poor who receive welfare are cheating the system, are lazy, do not want to work, and have been dependent on government aid their entire lives? How did the "problem of poverty" become the "problem of welfare"? When and why did we begin to perceive the government's ideal role as mandating participation in the paid labor force instead of providing opportunities for work and advancement?

Endnotes

¹ Post World War II Fordism, as defined by social theorist David Harvey, should be seen less "a mere system of mass production and more as a total way of life. Mass production means standardization of product as well as mass consumption; and that meant a whole new aesthetic and a commodification of culture . . . Fordism also built upon and contributed to the aesthetic of modernism — particularly the latter's penchant for functionality and efficiency — in very explicit ways, while the forms of state interventionism (guided by principles of bureaucratic-technical rationality), and the configuration of political power that gave the system its coherence, rested on notions of a mass economic democracy welded together through a balance of special-interest forces" (1990:135-136). The rigidity of this system made it destined to be supplanted by what Harvey terms "flexible accumulation" beginning in the early 1970s (1990:147).

Chapter One: Literature Review

Economic, social, and political change beginning in the 1970s

While the policies, rules, and specifics that guided early welfare programs were subject to change, and their success was not guaranteed, the stated aim of these programs was economic security in difficult times for families with children. I can find little evidence of any large-scale popular movements that questioned the very involvement of the federal government in providing this security, beginning with the inception of Social Security in 1935 through at least the early 1960s. Gallup polls from the mid-1960s show respondents overwhelmingly favoring mandatory work if available (for men). Respondents also agreed that food stamps should be given to all families below a certain income threshold. Surveyors asked no questions regarding work requirements for women with children, or women at all (Mink and Solinger 2003:333). Welfare experts of the 1940s and 1950s still stressed the need for poor (and particularly white) mothers to do the work of child rearing at home as a justification for the cash benefits provided by Aid to Dependent Children (Mink and Solinger 2003:145).

Literature on the welfare state, at this time and before, focused on the types of benefit programs offered as well as on the success and failure of these services to provide a decent standard of living for what was deemed the deserving poor, including those who wanted to work but could not, the elderly, women with young children. There was little discussion in the post New Deal decades of the economic and political conditions that resulted in the need for welfare in the first place nor was much said about the extent of the role the federal government should play in its funding and delivery. Welfare and poverty were not issues that were high on the national agenda or foremost in the public mind. It was in the mid to late 1960s, about the time

that Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs were being implemented and welfare rolls and costs were rising, that the debate in academic literature and the popular media began to emerge about the goals and responsibilities of the individual and the government in welfare policy (Mead 1986:14).

Typical of the type of welfare state analysis that emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s, June Axinn and Herman Levin (1975) focused on the role of the family as an economic unit as well as the structural and cultural factors that influence the creation of policy and programs. They identified four influential factors that are unique to a historical moment: the level of society's output, the view of the effectiveness of the welfare system, the view of human nature, and the society's historical heritage (1975:5). This seems to contradict their earlier assertion that political decisions about welfare are purely economically based, especially in light of their belief that morality and ideology are resistant to change and may hold over across changing economic landscapes (Axinn and Levin 1975:4-5). However, they do recognize that local responsibility almost always leads to a reduction in benefits, noting that "conservatism and restrictiveness increase as the level of government responsibility for program administration becomes more local" (Axinn and Levin 1975:285).

Axinn and Levin recognize two developing "motifs" in social welfare in the decade preceding 1975. The first is the belief that the inability to pay one's own way is a reprehensible crime. The second suggests that the family should be the unit responsible for economic welfare. Accordingly, the government should provide public welfare as a last resort. This is notable in that the government's role throughout this time was still considered to be that of the welfare provider in the event that the family unit failed in its duties (Axinn and Levin 1975:288).

Welfare was not yet so widely recognized as a vehicle for the transmission of mainstream cultural (capitalist) values and the enforcement of a market-oriented work ethic.

Recognizing this labor control function of welfare, one of the most important works on social welfare to be written in the pre-1973 era was *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. In it, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward posit that welfare is really a control mechanism, one used to stem civil and political disorder. In contrast to Axinn and Levin, the authors do not see a gradual liberalization of policy and benefits through the 1960s, but a “record of periodically expanding and contracting relief rolls as the system performs its two main functions: maintaining civil order and enforcing work” (Piven and Cloward 1971:xvii).

This cycle of control is not dependent strictly on economic conditions, as evidenced by the expansion of benefits and programs both during the Great Depression as well as the relatively affluent 1960s. Rather, it is related to stable employment conditions and a regular demand in capitalism’s requirement for labor. Historically, mass unemployment, due to economic depression or rapid modernization, has broken the bond between laborers and the institutions that controlled them, and undermined the ability of other institutions to restrain and control. To restore social order, Piven and Cloward assert, a “surrogate system of social control” took over for the market. Welfare as a social control mechanism does this by offering relief to those able-bodied citizens temporarily, before returning them to some type of work role, be it in the public or private sector, until control has been re-established (1971:6).

In the epilogue to the first edition of the book, Piven and Cloward predicted that there would soon be a return to the labor regulating functions of social welfare, presaged by the reforms being proposed at the time that required work force participation (1971:343). They believed that employers would soon press for additional reforms to welfare policy that would

allow them to reassert their power over labor, with the support and assistance of the middle and lower middle classes who were resentful of the cost of relief. According to Piven and Cloward, the coming tightening of relief measures would then force people off of the rolls and back into the labor force soon (1971:343–345).

While this retrenchment of relief did occur only a few years later, it was not a continuation of the contraction/expansion cycle that Piven and Cloward identified, but rather a part of a larger political, social, and cultural shift. The movement towards ever more restrictive welfare policies, regardless of market fluctuations, was inevitable if, as Robert Brenner posits (2007), the country has been on a rightward political trajectory after the fall of liberalism and the replacement of the rank and file leadership of labor unions. In his article “Structure vs. Conjecture: The 2006 Elections and the Rightward Shift,” Brenner links the rightward movement of even the Democratic Party in the United States to the emasculation of unions beginning shortly after passage of the SSA. Failed postwar strikes in 1946 led to demoralized union members, minimal turnout in the mid–term election, and eventually the Taft–Hartley Act of 1947 (2007:40). The power of labor continued its decline after this.

But as Brenner points out, the 1960s were a paradoxical time that allowed for the increase in social expenditures, and a proliferation of political liberalism, despite declining union membership and weakened working class solidarity. These organizations and movements were replaced by the civil rights movement and the attendant political demand for economic well–being. These demands resulted in the creation of increased social welfare programs and policy, such as Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society legislation (Brenner 2007:41). This was all occurring, however, in the midst of prosperity brought about by Keynesian economic policies, which advocated government stimulation of the economy through reduced interest rates and increased

spending on infrastructure, and the large federal deficits this required. There were massive welfare rights demonstrations beginning in the summer of 1966 and Piven and Cloward themselves devised a strategy to overload the welfare system in order to demand reform (Trattner 1999:343–344). This domestic unrest, and not a depressed economy, can perhaps be seen as an impetus for the Great Society’s expansion of social welfare programs.

Brenner argues that it was the economic stagnation and oil crisis of 1973, coupled with the backlash against Nixon after Watergate by middle and upper middle class suburbanites, which resulted in the election of 49 new moderate Democrats in 1974. The biggest priority for these newly elected legislators was reducing the government spending that had grown through the 1960s. A “transformed socio–political environment” had emerged according to Brenner (2007:42–43). It was “the disintegration of the labour movement, and of working class power more generally, that was the central factor in opening the way for the reconfiguration of politics under the onslaught of the corporations” (2007:44). The rise of corporate power and the rightward political shift it caused, predicated by the demise of union labor, were the beginnings of the decrease in the real dollar amount of benefits provided under the United States federal welfare system. There was, as well, a shift from its original goal of protection of families from the vagaries of the economy to the maintenance of a docile labor force.

For David Harvey, this shift in the goals of the welfare state is part of the larger move from Fordism, or the Fordist mode of production, to that of flexible accumulation, which itself is part of the rise of postmodernism. Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, suggests 1973¹ as the turning point in the regime of accumulation, and the social and political regulation that accompanied this change (1989:121). Prior to that time, Fordism was the complete way of life in America, marked by mass production, standardization, commodification of culture, and a new

aesthetic based on functionality and efficiency. In turn, the Fordist paradigm offered job security, as well as wages that could support a family and were tied to the growth of national productivity. Harvey asserts that Fordism, as imagined by Henry Ford, recognized that, “mass production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society” (1990:126–127).

Those who were excluded from the high-wage and secure Fordist jobs found in manufacturing and industry, (e.g. women and minorities), had become discontent. Towards the end of the reign of Fordism, counter-cultural, social and political movements were beginning to take hold. By this time, Harvey argues, “the legitimation of state power depended on the ability to spread the benefits of Fordism over all and to find ways to deliver adequate health care, housing, and educational services on a massive scale but in a humane and caring way . . . in the end it was probably the quantitative failure that provoked the most serious dilemmas” (1990:139). Government’s ability to supply these services was based on the “continuous acceleration in the productivity of labour in the corporate sector” (Harvey 1989:139).

It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the rigidity of Fordism — which was tied to the manufacturing of goods and Keynesianism’s federal deficit spending — was countered by newly liberal monetary policy that led to rising inflation. The recession that followed, and the concurrent oil crisis, “set in motion a whole set of processes that undermined the Fordist enterprise.” The 1970s and 1980s were consequently a time of political and social restructuring that Harvey believes may be the start of an entirely new regime of accumulation (Harvey 1989:145).

So what did this change mean for the welfare state? Since the Fordist political consensus was that entitlements and income redistribution should be funded out of growth, and growth had slackened off, cuts in state expenditures for public welfare were inevitable. Necessary cuts to the welfare state during the crisis of 1973 to 1975 then became a permanent governmental virtue propagated by “neoconservatives.” Proponents of this emerging ideology were defined by its “godfather” Irving Kristol as believing in not only a libertarian economic policy focused on cutting taxes in pursuit of economic growth, but being concerned with what he terms a “decline in democratic culture” (2003). The popular image of government’s ideal role that neoconservatives cultivated was of “strong governments administering powerful doses of unpalatable medicine to restore the health of ailing economies” (Harvey 1989:168). As these neoconservatives were arguing for the reduction of benefits and cutting taxes, they were lamenting the “crisis of democracy” that was a result of a social structure where wealth and learning were concentrated among a small percentage of the population. For them, this was not a problem of social inequality but one of a prevailing sentiment among academics and intellectuals who devalued capitalism and the current leadership and valued private satisfaction instead of the “materialistic work-oriented, public spirited values” of earlier times (Crozier 1975:5–7).

These political changes did not occur in a social and cultural vacuum. Flexible capital accumulation (Harvey 1990:147), and the move away from the Fordist mode of production, made collective action more difficult. Competitive individualism became the hegemonic value. Harvey (1989:172) references Georg Simmel’s assertion that times of fragmentation and economic insecurity see a return to basic institutions and the authority of the family, state, and religion. With this in mind, the rise of the neoconservatives in the political arena, and the

popularity of individualist ideologies that exploded in the 1980s make sense in the reality of the postmodernist environment.

Marxist James O'Connor, writing *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* just prior to Harvey's watershed year of 1973, argues that the existence of the welfare state is essential for capital accumulation. While the state and the private sector can both grow at the same time and neither grows at the other's expense, crisis occurs because there is inevitably a gap between state expenditures and state revenues. Essentially, for O'Connor, capital accumulation results in costs and those costs are increasingly socialized. Yet the profits—social capital—are appropriated privately. This structural contradiction, also evident in the state's obligation to both provide an environment amenable to accumulation as well as to legitimate itself by creating the conditions for social harmony, O'Connor terms "the fiscal crisis of the state" (1973:6–10). Wealth accumulation leads to increased inequality and associated government costs, as well as decreased revenue to compensate for these rising costs.

O'Connor attributes some of the state's problems to the erosion of federalism, though in retrospect, it has been federalism in the realm of public welfare, as well as federal deregulation of business, that has allowed the modern corporatist government to thrive and per capita social welfare expenditures to fall. He writes, "There has been a gradual erosion of the traditional federal system in the United States. Monopoly capitalist groups and the federal executive have been working together to increase federal power in local affairs and, step-by-step, to dismantle local government" (O'Connor 1973:90). One example of this increasing control is the federal establishment of guidelines for grant-in-aid packages to states (O'Connor 1973:90). It is now evident that the removal of those guidelines, as well as the establishment of block grants, proved detrimental to those dependent on federal welfare programs. It also freed up additional federal

funds to be used elsewhere. As Axinn and Levin have noted, greater local control results in increasingly conservative eligibility standards and benefit levels (1975:285).

O'Connor identifies two purposes to the modern welfare state, both contradictory to its stated goal of protection from economic downturns. The welfare system, as it existed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, had to exist because of the imbalances of capitalism. It was created to control surplus labor, as well as to increase demand for goods and services, and to expand domestic markets. O'Connor argues that state budgets redistribute income backwards and forwards within the working class in an effort to maintain harmony, expand productivity, and increase accumulation and profits (1973:167).

The problems arise, however, when the rapid accumulation of capital results in the need for increased welfare expenditures as more of the costs of this accumulation are socialized. O'Connor believes that lawmakers eventually realized that poverty is inherent in a capitalist system and that economic growth alone cannot eliminate this contradiction. Governments tried to escape this problem by devising the first welfare programs that encouraged recipients to return to the work force by providing in-kind benefits like day care centers and job training and also by attempting to reform the behavior of the poor whom they believed did not share in the middle class work ethic.

According to O'Connor, these methods of social control would not be reduced — and political and social control returned to normal — with an upswing of the economy (Piven and Cloward 1971). It is capital growth and monopolistic accumulation itself that is a source of poverty (Gilbert 2002:11). As long as this contradiction persists, government welfare expenditures will struggle to keep up with need. Tactics of increasing control of labor and

forced market participation, as well as rampant corporate welfare, will prevail. For O'Connor, the only solution to this crisis is a complete abandonment of capitalism in favor of socialism.

This earlier discussion of a crisis in the welfare state by both O'Connor and others is identified by Neil Gilbert as “not signaling an impending bankruptcy so much as a turning point—a change of course in response to new problems and values” (2004:44) evident in the change in literature on the welfare state that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Abandoning the concept of a crisis, researchers and theorists focused on new arrangements for social protection (Gilbert 2002:44). The change Gilbert outlines in *Transformation of the Welfare State: The Silent Surrender of Public Responsibility* is based on four shifting characteristics of the welfare state in modern times and is representative of a paradigm shift that he believes has been minimized by policy makers.

These changes are evidence of a more market-oriented approach to social welfare (Gilbert 2002:45–46). Gilbert terms this the emerging “enabling state,” which shifts responsibility for the provision of services from public agencies to private agencies, with funds increasingly spent on indirect costs. Universal entitlement, evident in programs like Social Security that minimize stigma, is abandoned for selective eligibility—targeting certain minority groups as beneficiaries of programs—which attempts to restore social equity but has the downside of stigmatizing recipients and making the programs politically unpalatable.

Most importantly, for this discussion, is the move towards policies that coerce labor force participation, instead of protecting labor from harsh free market conditions, a shift that reached its apex with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). Entitlement to social and economic support, regardless of behavioral constraints, works to decommodify labor, making it not purely responsive to market forces. However, the

newly “heightened emphasis on employment–related measures in the enabling state has been accompanied by the development of social provisions aimed to enhance human capital and help the unemployed adjust to modern labor market requirements,” according to Gilbert (2002:46). These provisions might better be seen not as helping the unemployed to adjust to market conditions but as providing the market a labor force with few alternatives but to accept the conditions of employment it is given.

These shifts in policy and ideology result in a loosening of the social cohesion that arises from the existence of (and public discussion about) our shared rights as citizens. The prior concentration of the public discourse on rights is replaced by a demand for individual responsibility, civic duty and an increase in importance on supposedly shared values (Gilbert 2002:46). Gilbert offers a sociological explanation of these events, seeing the enabling state as shifting the method of social cohesion from the realm of citizenship to the realm of Durkheimian membership in secondary groups that take the place of the state in promoting social life (2002:46). But more important to the concept of the welfare/enabling state, which Gilbert does not address here, are the “shared values” that are so often linked to the promotion of economic personal responsibility and the importance of hard work within the capitalist labor force. Those who reject these values risk losing membership in wider societal networks along with the political and economic benefits and opportunities that come with this membership.

Gilbert’s paradigm shift entails not just the changing of welfare state policies but an entire movement to the right, where politically left-leaning and liberal politicians now carry through the policies earlier demanded by conservatives, as Brenner also argued (2007). Even in the midst of drastic changes to the goals, policies, and practices of welfare state mechanisms, these leaders deny this reorientation, framing it as simply “beneficial adjustments” (Gilbert

2002:179). Gilbert advises that before any actually beneficial and protection-oriented welfare policy can be created, there must be recognition of this paradigm shift, born of O'Connor's fiscal crisis of the state, the fall of Fordism, and the concomitant abandonment of public responsibility for the poor that began in the 1970s.

The popular ideological shift of the 1980s and early 1990s

While politicians began to radically redirect the welfare state from its earlier (stated) goal of social protection to that of social control and obligatory labor force participation during the crisis of the 1970s, their argument that this shift in goals was a necessary evil and good for the nation (Harvey 1989:168) seemed to be internalized by the public. It was manifested in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and in the growing popularity of conservative ideology among voters. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s there were a series of influential and widely read books (Murray 1984, Auletta 1982, Mead 1986) that used varying arguments to arrive at the same conclusion, that the welfare state of the prior fifty years had resulted in dependence, a loss of work ethic, and increased poverty. Welfare policy thus needed to be fundamentally changed, if not abandoned altogether. Though this was not the first argument for welfare state diminishment (e.g. Rescher 1972), it was certainly the most widely received.

Leading the popular charge for the complete abandonment of any federal welfare system was political scientist Charles Murray. In *Losing Ground*, he argued that poverty relief programs were, by design, harmful to the poor and that they encouraged the poor to behave in ways that kept them in poverty. Since this knot cannot be untied, Murray suggests cutting the rope altogether, and ending all entitlement programs for all working-aged people and their underaged dependents (1984:228).

Murray, seemingly ignoring the civil rights and welfare rights movements of the 1960s, claims that the creation of the war on poverty programs and the “paradigm shift” that occurred between 1964 and 1967 was an adoption of the beliefs of the intelligentsia, and neither indicative of a shift in public ideology nor a result of popular movements for economic equality (1984:41–43). Accordingly, the elite belief that the economy and educational system were to blame, as well as what he saw as an agreement by Great Society policy makers that there was a need for an equality of outcome and not just opportunity, represent for Murray a sea change in welfare policy that served only to harm those it was designed to help.

Murray reviews a number of statistics on employment, education, crime, poverty, and family composition. He concludes that, as welfare spending increased, social indicators pointed to a worsening situation for the poor. This increase in spending and decrease in effectiveness, he believes, is because social policy since 1964 had ignored the perspectives of “white popular wisdom” that could be heard in “blue-collar bars” and “country-club lounges.” This popular wisdom, Murray writes, is, “when stripped of its prejudices and bombast,” based on three premises: (1) people respond to incentives and disincentives; (2) people are not inherently hard working or moral; and (3) people must be held responsible for their actions. He deems it simple to “strip away” the racism inherent in this popular wisdom without further discussion. He accuses social analysts of rejecting these premises because they are too simple to be true, and not because they reflect racist and classist prejudices (1984:146).

These social programs — formulated by elites and following the elite wisdom on the causes of and solutions to poverty — brought about failure of the poor to conform to middle class values. First, Murray argues, increased eligibility and benefit levels cause the poor to choose the short term monetary gain of welfare and life as a single parent over behaviors like

low-wage work and marriage, which are strategies he believes to be beneficial in the long term. These incentives not to work in the short term injured those who chose difficult and low paying jobs over the security of welfare. Thus, welfare eroded the traditional system of rewards and punishments/ incentives and disincentives in choosing or not choosing to work (Murray 1984:177).

Next, Murray suggests that the “system is to blame” argument is in fact itself to blame for the “homogenization of the poor” and the diminishment of the deserving/undeserving distinction (1984:178–191). He argues that status was “withdrawn from the low-income, independent working family, with disastrous consequences to the quality of life of such families,” and “withdrawn from the behaviors that engender escape from poverty” (Murray 1984:179). Essentially, he says that without external status rewards for hard work and upward mobility, and regardless of the presence of material rewards, the poor have no incentive to work towards getting themselves out of poverty.

Implicit in Murray’s argument are a number of assumptions, including the belief that marriage and work are simply a matter of choice for the poor, and not a decision hinged on complex life circumstances. Additionally, as the “popular wisdom” states, he relies on the belief that people are inherently lazy and immoral and will assume the path of minimal work despite the accompanying minimal rewards. Murray’s reliance on the concept of poverty and welfare reliance as an alternative to hard work, as a *personal choice*, necessarily led first to the call for personal responsibility for economic well-being and next to the end of programs that only encourage people to choose poverty and government dependence.

While Murray’s welfare policy recommendation of abolishing all federal welfare was extreme and unlikely to be adopted, he was only the most conservative of many voices rejecting

systemic explanations for poverty in favor of theories that focused on the behavior of the poor within the current welfare system. Lawrence Mead objected not to the welfare state's size, but to the lack of obligations it established on the part of recipients. Only a few years after the release of Murray's tome, Mead's *Beyond Entitlement* (1986) offered another ideological critique of recent policy. It furthered the argument for a welfare overhaul to reverse the paradigm shift Murray identified as occurring between 1964 and 1967. To summarize his argument, Mead wrote,

I think the main problem with the welfare state is its permissiveness, not its size. Today poverty often arises from the functioning problems of the poor themselves, especially difficulties in getting through school, working, and keeping their families together. But the social programs that support the needy rarely set standards for them. Recipients seldom have to work or otherwise function in return for support. If they did, the evidence suggests that they would function better, bringing closer an integrated society (1986:ix).

For welfare programs to work, according to Mead, there needs to be a balance between the benefits given and the duties of benefit recipients to maintain standards of behavior that non welfare recipients are held to. Mead believes that those who depended on the government for assistance were shielded and able to "get away with" behavior that would be unacceptable for someone of the middle class.

Central to Mead's argument is his belief that the role of the government is to maintain Hobbesian order, that is, the "*public* conditions for the *private* assurance of what Jefferson called 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'" (1986:5). This means managing economic conditions and assuring equal economic opportunity to all, not simply maintaining public order or providing public services. But this order cannot be provided by government alone. It is

simply a “mechanism by which people force themselves to serve and obey *each other* in necessary ways” (Mead 1986:6).

In Mead’s argument, we see the call both for individual economic responsibility and for governmental behavior requirements and restrictions. Poverty, he believes, was not just the result of too little income, but of the non work or irregular work of the poor. He claims that this is especially true of welfare recipients who “seldom worked” (1986:91). If Mead is correct, it follows then that obligatory participation in the labor force would end the poverty problem.

Why would the poor, or anyone, voluntarily choose not to work? Unemployment, he thinks, is not due to the lack of jobs. Rather it is the lack of availability of *satisfactory* jobs with rewarding pay and good conditions, as well as the presence of alternative sources of income, namely, government redistribution programs. Mead also locates part of this trend of non work in the cultural values of the poor. He claims that while the poor may say that they want to work, they are either only telling the researcher what they think he or she wants to hear, or their desire to work is highly conditional and dependent on government provision of child care, training programs, transportation, and acceptable positions (1986:80).

These able-bodied yet non working poor people, with values so different from the mainstream, are part of what became known popularly in the 1980s as “the underclass.” Ken Auletta’s book, titled *The Underclass* (1982), purports to give a “first hand account of America’s new social dropouts — street criminals, hustlers, long-term welfare recipients and the homeless — and of what might be done to bring them into the mainstream.” The image of the deserving poor — white, intact families whose breadwinner had lost his job due to circumstances beyond his control — had been nearly universally abandoned in the popular media and by academics that came to influence welfare policy through the mid-1990s. The welfare fraud thesis — the belief

that many were cheating the system and living the high life at taxpayer expense — that O'Connor claims was discredited in the 1960s (1973:165) reappeared with renewed strength.

Auletta's "first-hand account" was written after he embedded himself into a group of trainees in a work program for members of the "underclass" with particularly acute "behavioral and income deficiencies." What is important about the book is neither the study of the efficacy of the work program nor the policy suggestions Auletta makes. Rather, it is the unquestioned acceptance of the existence of an underclass, trapped by their own culture of poverty. By the time of the publication of *The Underclass*, Auletta believed that there was "broad agreement that America [had] developed an underclass" (1982:50). Characterized differently by the right and the left — either as pathology, passivity, and hostility, or as alienation, hopelessness, and despair (1982:50) — underclass values were projected onto millions of the poor who were now popularly viewed as distinctively the "other," needing behavior and value modification and not just equal economic opportunity and income assistance. A second paradigm shift, counter to the one Murray identifies in the 1960s, could be said to have occurred in the popular perception of poverty in America in the 1980s.

This is not to say that there were no differing or alternative views on the subject. Two books by famous sociologists countered the conservative arguments for the very existence of a culture of poverty and an underclass, and for the end to welfare entitlements. In Herbert Gans' *The War Against the Poor* (1996), he posits that the labeling of the poor as members of an undeserving underclass has allowed the nation to more easily wage "war" against them using punitive policy measures. The ideological assault on the poor was an *ex post facto* justification for the changes to the welfare state that had begun following the economic and cultural shift beginning in 1973.

Gans locates the start of the popular use of the term “underclass”—used to refer specifically to both black poverty and poverty with a negative behavioral aspect—to a cover story in the August 29, 1977 issue of Time Magazine. In it, the members of the underclass were referred to as “victims and victimizers in the culture of the street hustle” (1996:31). But it was Auletta’s use that was the “last stage in the label-making process,” making the term officially one that referred to the “behavioral deficiencies” of a diverse group including the mentally ill, the homeless, drug addicts, former drug addicts, welfare recipients, and criminals (Gans 1996:33–35).

Gans believes that the use of this label creates distance between the poor and the rest of society, allowing for the accommodation of normally taboo racist beliefs and other prejudices. He sees a harmful process occurring whereby the term “underclass” is reified and its definition is transformed into an actual set of people with its imaginary roots forgotten. From there, the “underclass” can become a causal mechanism. According to Gans, being a member of the underclass can be used as an explanation for why someone becomes homeless, gets addicted to drugs, or commits a crime (1996:61).

This labeling leads to the determination of the “undeservingness” of the poor, which further leads to actions and policies that worsen their plight but are supposedly of benefit to the rest of society. Of the thirteen functions that Gans believes this process of labeling serves, two are most relevant to this discussion. First is the shift in power to conservative politicians and interests. If the poor are undeserving, and it is the liberal Left who speak on their behalf, conservatives can attack such leftist positions as favoring criminals and miscreants. The polity “as a whole can . . . shift to the right.” Gans notes that it was this function of undeservingness

that Murray called upon when suggesting that welfare be abolished because it only resulted in increased poverty (1996:99).

Next, Gans argues that the “undeservingness” label functions to push the poor out of the labor force completely, thereby reducing the formal unemployment rate and also conserving jobs for the deserving poor and the non poor. This is accomplished via legislation and the informal labeling of the poor as unable to learn skills and as having a culture that leads them to avoid work. Gans goes so far as to suggest the end result could be the complete elimination of surplus labor due to early death from a decreased standard of living (1996:101).

This belief that the poor could essentially die out, taking surplus labor with them, could be construed as contradicting the theory of welfare as a means of forcing the poor back into the work force. However, the two could work in concert. By forcing the poor out of the labor force initially, making them desperate enough to seek welfare, they can be made to re-enter the workforce on more exploitative terms. While this may be the case, Gans still proposes a comprehensive job-centered policy initiative aimed at bringing the poor back into the mainstream. Reminiscent of Mead’s argument, Gans suggests that once the poor are working and entitled to the rights that mainstream societal membership includes, they will “be more likely to accept the responsibilities that come with these rights” (1996:108). While Gans has railed against the labeling of the poor as an underclass with behavioral deficiencies, he has ascribed these negative characteristics to them himself in assuming that they do not already, as a group, accept their responsibilities as citizens. Despite this contradiction, *The War Against the Poor* offers an important dissenting voice in the debate over the perceived antisocial behavior of the “underclass,” “the welfare queens,” and those trapped in the “culture of poverty.”

One of the major principles of Gans' proposed policy was its universality, a concept that was also given voice by William Julius Wilson nearly a decade earlier. Yet, unlike Gans, Wilson was not averse to using terms like "underclass" to label the poor. He believed that,

. . . it would be far worse to obscure the profound changes in the class structure and social behavior of ghetto neighborhoods by avoiding the use of the term underclass. Indeed, the real challenge is to describe and explain these developments accurately so that liberal policymakers can appropriately address them (1987:8).

Wilson readily admits that the behavior and the life choices of the poor have changed since the 1950s — essentially that an underclass characterized by nonmainstream behavior does exist — but he attacks the conservative argument that the rise in crime, joblessness, and single-parent households are a result of liberal welfare policies that resulted in the poor's abandonment of mainstream values. Rather, it is social isolation, and the "concentration effects" of living an isolated life in the ghetto, not a culture of poverty, that makes it more difficult to live life according to the rules of mainstream society (1987:60). Wilson identifies these concentration effects as:

. . . the constraints and opportunities in neighborhoods in which the population is overwhelmingly socially disadvantaged—constraints and opportunities that include the kinds of ecological niches that the residents of these neighborhoods occupy in terms of access to jobs and job networks, availability of marriageable partners, involvement in quality schools, and exposure to conventional role models (1987:61).

While conditions in the ghetto due to concentration effects are not the result of a "culture of poverty" for Wilson, cultural traits there *have* changed in response to structural constraints. Therefore, policy should be oriented towards changing these structural conditions that lead to

negative cultural traits and not towards punitive measures designed to modify the behavior of the poor (1987:61).

To correct these problems, Wilson advocates a comprehensive and universal program of complete economic and social reform. While there would still be some means tested and affirmative action programs, these would be merely offshoots of a larger system where all citizens are entitled to benefits. Wilson believed that if those other than the poor were also the beneficiaries of these government programs, they would assure their funding and continued existence, just as we have seen with the defense of Social Security by even those who are opposed to programs targeted to poor mothers and children. According to Wilson, economic stagnation and joblessness must be addressed at a macroeconomic national level, in addition to the provision of cash allowances and job training programs, for widespread poverty eradication to become a reality (1987:157).

The more liberal views on poverty and welfare of both Wilson and Gans (though definitely farther right of the “liberal” positions of the 1960s) were certainly in the minority through the 1980s and 1990s. Conservatism, and conservative politicians and thinkers, dominated politics and public discourse during this period. Beginning with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1981, and culminating with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996 under Bill Clinton, welfare policy became increasingly punitive and work oriented in response to a changing perception of the poor as being the cause of their own poverty.

Endnotes

¹ Harvey writes, “The breakdown in 1971 of the Bretton Woods agreement to fix the price of gold and the convertibility of the dollar was an acknowledgment that the United States no longer had the power to control fiscal and monetary policy single-handedly. The adoption of a flexible exchange rate system in 1973 . . . signaled the complete abolition of Bretton Woods. Since that time all nation states have been at the mercy of financial disciplining . . . “ (1990:164-165).

Chapter Two: Changes in Modern Welfare Policy

Welfare policy through the 1970s and 1980s

One of the largest expansions to the federal welfare state occurred under conservative President Richard Nixon, just as stagflation was taking hold and unemployment was rising. In the fall of 1972, the nation adopted the Supplemental Security Income Program (SSI), which guaranteed income for aged, blind, and totally and permanently disabled. It also established uniform federal eligibility and benefit requirements. This was the nation's first guaranteed annual income program (Trattner 1999:348). Yet this expansion of entitlement was intended strictly for the "deserving" poor, those unable to work (and not simply unwilling) according to the standards of the federal government. By contrast, Nixon's proposal for a guaranteed income for families with children, including those families with able-bodied males in the household, never made it past Congress. By the time of Nixon's resignation during the Watergate scandal, and because of that scandal, Walter Trattner suggests that even liberals "began to question sharply the ability of elected officials to govern fairly and to control the course of events, especially in a humane and rational way, and to urge that government involvement in social programs be curtailed" (1999:351).

This distrust of national leadership persisted through the administration of Jimmy Carter. Trattner argues that this is why Carter's proposal for a complete overhaul of the welfare system was allowed to expire by Congress before coming to a vote. The Better Jobs and Income Program, a two-tiered system to guarantee jobs for those who could work and income for those who could not, as well as a guaranteed minimum income for all, languished in Congress without

ever being voted on (Trattner 1999:355–356). This was just one of Carter’s plans, including a national health care program, which he was unable to get Congress to approve.

While this could be seen as a manifestation of his lame–duck status, intensified by the high rate of inflation and the Iranian hostage crisis, which eventually played itself out with Ronald Reagan’s landslide victory of 1980 (Trattner 1999:358), Michael Katz sees both Carter and Nixon’s failures as mainly ideologically based. Because both of their plans did not make benefits totally contingent on the recipients’ willingness to work, they were “threatening to aid the unworthy poor and breaching the distinction between public assistance and social insurance; [both the Nixon and Carter plans] violated the structural foundations of American welfare” (1996:278).

Reagan interpreted his election as a mandate to enact policies that began the dismantling of the welfare state. Influenced by advisers who argued either that the war on poverty had already been won, or that the poor actually needed poverty to spur them to work (Trattner 1999:363), Reagan set about rolling back the programs begun during Roosevelt’s New Deal. He drastically and quickly slashed billions of dollars from the budgets of social welfare programs. This was not to reduce the size of the government, but to divert those funds to defense spending instead. Katz writes:

By 1983, under complex new regulations, 408,000 people had lost their eligibility for AFDC and 299,000 had lost their benefits. The average loss of benefits per family was \$1,555 per year . . . Other regulations restricted eligibility for food stamps and cut \$2 billion out of the programs \$12 billion budget . . . Extended unemployment insurance benefits were cut back—in 1975 ‘78 percent of jobless Americans received unemployment insurance benefit’ compared to 39 percent at the end of 1983 (1996:296).

It is estimated that a total \$57 billion was cut from federal welfare programs that benefited the poor from 1982 to 1986 (Stoesz and Karger 1990:145). During the Reagan administration, decreases to benefits were not made simply out of a reluctance to raise benefits in the face of inflation or the general decrease in purchasing power across the nation. Rather, they were cuts intended to roll back what was left of the welfare state (Katz 1996:297).

For most of his two terms, Reagan continued his dedication to the conservative values of individualism and personal economic responsibility while simultaneously expanding the size of government in areas like defense. He did this while ignoring or discounting the poverty problem and blaming any existing poverty on the unwillingness of the poor to work themselves into the economic mainstream. Additionally, in his 1982 State of the Union address, he called for a “New Federalism” along with state control and complete funding of both AFDC and food stamps, allowing localities to make cut backs as they deemed necessary (Trattner 1999:365). States responded by initiating “workfare” programs as a means of alleviating the strain of public welfare on their already strapped budgets.

Despite Reagan’s belief that the poor needed less welfare to get out of poverty, and likely because of it, conditions worsened. Congress reacted by passing the Family Support Act (FSA), the only major programmatic change to welfare in the 1980s, which promised to make United States welfare an employment system and not a payment system. The most important aspect of the new program was its requirement that single parents on welfare be required to work in order to receive benefits. Those who could not find employment in the private sector were made to enroll in education or job training programs. States were required to meet quotas for enrollment in training programs. If they failed to comply, their grants would be reduced (Trattner

1999:376). State administered workfare was now a requirement for receipt of federal funds, and the first steps towards the punitive PRWORA had been taken.

The administration of George H. W. Bush in 1988 did little to address the problem of poverty. Concerned with the overthrow of Noriega and the war in Iraq, there was a marked absence of welfare legislation during his time in office. The 1980s had ended, and the 1990s began, with the continued operation of the welfare system under the regulations created by the FSA. But there was a new consensus about a new workfare that required mutual obligation. The state was required to provide benefits and in turn, the recipient was required to participate in the states work programs in order to transition from welfare to private sector employment (Katz 1996:306). Welfare could no longer be considered protection from the ups and downs of the labor market. It now functioned to force people into the private labor force simply to be eligible for benefits.

Dashed hopes for progressive change

Just as they reacted to the political impotence of Carter by electing Reagan in 1980, American voters then elected Bill Clinton in 1992 as a statement of their increased concern with worsening economic indicators and other domestic issues such as welfare and health care. Clinton, unlike Bush before him, inspired “great optimism that [he] would make good on his promises to change the way things worked in Washington and to be President to all of the American people” (Trattner 1999:392). His election seemed to herald great changes, especially to the welfare system, of which he proposed setting time limits on received benefits (Trattner 1999:390). Though Clinton attempted to hold the centrist line in order to get elected by suggesting these tweaks to the system, policy experts were suggesting a complete rethinking of

how the welfare system should actually operate, as well a total overhaul of government attitude towards social welfare and its policy to provide for it.

Gosta Esping-Andersen advised looking at the social welfare problem from a regime standpoint—the welfare state cannot be understood as simply a totality of government amelioration programs and income transfers but must consider the interaction of governments and their policy, labor markets, and households that encompass the regime (1990:1–2, 21). According to Esping-Andersen, these regimes are clustered into three types. The Social Democratic regimes have extended benefits to the middle class and have pursued a high level of equality, and not a policy of the provision for minimal needs. Corporatist regimes aim to maintain status and class distinctions, and their policies were often tied to the Church, yet there is little debate as to the state’s proper role in providing benefits.

The United States falls into the third category of the schema, with a liberal welfare state, . . . in which means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers, or modest social insurance plans predominate. Benefits cater mainly to a clientele of low-income, usually working class, state dependents. In this model, the progress of social reform has been severely circumscribed by traditional, liberal work-ethic norms: it is one where the limits of welfare equal the marginal propensity for welfare instead of work. Entitlement rules are therefore strict and often associated with stigma; benefits are typically modest. In turn, the state encourages the market, either passively — by guaranteeing only a minimum — or actively — by subsidizing private welfare schemes (Esping-Andersen 1990:26–27).

Esping-Andersen sees these categories, and the historical forces behind them, as being vital in understanding why welfare states operate the way that they do and what their future prospects

are. What is possible, and what is likely, to occur in United States welfare policy is dictated by its regime type, which depends on a numeric and economic minority for support (1990:33).

If this is the case, welfare programs that directly benefit the majority of Americans would be the only ones to achieve majority public support in the political environment of the late twentieth century. This was evident in the “political storm” that followed Reagan’s suggested cuts to Social Security (Trattner 1999:366) and in President George W. Bush’s failure to find the public and legislative support to privatize the program. As with William Julius Wilson before her, policy expert Theda Skocpol also advocated a universal approach, within which there would be targeted programs for the poor. This would be part of a total redesign of United States social provisions, to solve the structural problem inherent in Esping-Andersen’s liberal welfare state regime’s provision of benefits to select groups (Skocpol 1995:251).

She identifies historical targeted antipoverty initiatives like poorhouses, mothers’ pensions, and the war on poverty as being politically unsustainable due specifically to their limited scope. The divide over support for the war on poverty by benefit recipients in the 1960s and 1970s and the disdain for the programs by middle income tax payers in the 1970s and 1980s is specifically noted for moving southern whites and white urban ethnics away from the Democratic Party and towards the election of leaders who then dismantled those same policies. The perception that they were not benefiting from social welfare programs impeded the viability of those programs (Skocpol 1995:258). This is untrue for programs that are perceived to target “everyone,” and not just the impoverished. The endurance of Social Security’s income program for the elderly, as well as the support for benefits offered to Civil War veterans and the health education programs for expectant mothers, are evidence of the importance of universalism in social policy design (Skocpol 1995:259–266).

On the eve of the debate over PRWORA, Skocpol noted that Clinton has “done a good job of highlighting the importance of moving in [the] direction” of providing more social support for working families caught in between rich and poor. She saw a potential for “progressive” politics and social policy on Clinton’s part that would incorporate universalism (especially in health care) but not at the expense of stressing the “broadly shared values” of work and parental responsibility (Skocpol 1995:312).

The welfare legislation actually passed by Congress and signed into law by Clinton was quite different. The shift in public opinion since the 1960s culminated in Clinton’s promise to “end welfare as we know it” by allowing “Congressional Republicans to take the initiative in revamping the entire system” (Trattner 1999:396). The result was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of August 1996, which abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children (the cash benefit program first created under the Social Security Act of 1935). PRWORA offered grants to the states, allowing them to set benefit levels and requiring them to cut off benefits to recipients after two years, regardless of employment status. Benefits could not be received for more than five years in a lifetime, and other rules restricted eligibility for legal immigrants and women who had more children while currently receiving welfare, as well allowing invasive drug testing of recipients (Trattner 1999:397). Congress’ stated aim was the promotion of “work” (in the private sector and away from the home), “job preparation” (in low wage service sector work) and heterosexual “marriage” (regardless of the quality and safety of the relationship) (Hays 2003:4).

This legislation was not signed into law without the objection of some. One newspaper article in USA Today quotes Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund, as saying, “President Clinton’s signature makes a mockery of his pledge not to hurt children,” as

well as Senator Daniel Moynihan, “those involved will take this disgrace to their graves” (Welch 1996). A *New York Times* columnist declared that Clinton’s signature on the Act did more harm to children than any actions of the two Presidents before him (Welch 1996). An assistant secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services resigned in protest (Trattner 1999:398). The contested PRWORA (and its reauthorization in 2002) was the last major social welfare legislation to date. Opinions on its efficacy — at not simply reducing caseloads but actually reducing poverty and unemployment among current and former recipients — is still being debated.

Post-welfare reform: The results and the future

While those in the popular media debated whether or not welfare reform had been successful based on poverty statistics, caseload numbers, and anecdotal evidence (Eckholm 2006, Samuelson 2006), Sharon Hays embedded herself with two social service offices providing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF, the new AFDC), and other benefit programs, one in a small historic city and the other in a dangerous inner-city neighborhood. As she completed her research, the number of welfare recipients fell from 12.2 million in 1996 to 5.3 million in 2001 (2003:8). Census records indicate that for the same period of time, poverty fell by 2 percent for all people, from 13.7 percent in 1996 to 11.7 percent in 2001.

More importantly than the numerical data, Hays focused on the values of the nation as reflected in its laws. PRWORA, she writes, “provides a reflected image of American culture and reinforces a system of beliefs about how *all* of us should behave” (2003:9). The legislation is a social experiment in promoting a work ethic and a certain type of family values (Hays 2003, 10). For Hays, welfare is a response to the question of whether we should as a nation support individual economic self-sufficiency first and above all or if (for mothers, or all women) we

should promote traditional family values that keep them in the home. It offers a “one–sided reflection” of the nation’s values and an often contradictory one (2003:15).

Hays wonders if the “old family ideal” is dead and if we have lost our concern for children in our staunch promotion of self–sufficiency. Yet of the four goals outlined in the Act, only one mentions work. The others focus on the “formation and maintenance of two–parent families,” prevention and reduction of out–of–wedlock pregnancies, and the provision of benefits for needy families to allow children to be cared for in their own homes (2003:16–17).

The value of work and family togetherness are moral and honorable, Hays believes, but they become contradictory within welfare reform in the context of the current social fragmentation and rising global inequality. She writes,

If you scrub off all the controversy and contradiction of welfare reform, you can find a set of honorable moral principles . . . independence, productivity, conscientious citizenship, family togetherness, social connection, community, and the well–being of children . . . The reasons they emerge as contradictory and punitive relative to welfare reform is that this takes place in the context of massive changes in family and work life, deepening levels of social distrust, rising social inequalities, and an increasingly competitive global marketplace . . . social and moral complexity [have been translated] into simplified slogans and stereotypes that obscure the more difficult dilemmas and the more disturbing social inequities involved (2003:21).

These “national values” become distorted as they pass through the hands of the public, business owners, politicians, and especially the media. The result manifests itself in what Hays calls the “Work Plan” which abandons notions of collective progress in favor of win–at–all–costs individualism and the “Family Plan” which champions only one particular type of traditional family that is increasingly no longer a reality for many Americans (Hays 2003:23–24).

Looking beyond the value transmission function of the welfare state, Barbara Ehrenreich, in her foreword to Albelda and Whithorn's *Lost Ground*, calls welfare reform (in the form of PRWORA) an initiative "launched against American workers by their employers in the wave of class warfare that began in the 1970s" (Albelda and Withorn 2002:ix). Its "disciplining effect" extends to all workers, making them unwilling and unlikely to agitate for better working conditions or better pay because of the new holes in their social safety net. For Ehrenreich, welfare reform is in line with union busting, drug testing, and increased workplace supervision. It is not simply an issue of racism or a women's problem. Rather it is a matter of class and of worker exploitation.

In her essay in the same collection, Frances Fox Piven links the last major changes in welfare in the United States to the globalization of capital and abandonment of industry in favor of a service economy reliant on electronic information and transportation networks. In the race to attract investors with low taxes and low wages, expensive social programs must be cut because they make a country uncompetitive. The result, she says, is that:

The lower tiers of the labor market are already characterized by growing instability and insecurity as a result of job restructuring and growing reliance on contingent workers. To this mix we are now adding several million desperately poor women who have lost their welfare benefits and now compete with other low-wage workers for jobs that are already insecure (Gault and Um'rani 2000). As a consequence, despite low levels of unemployment, insecurity is increasing at the bottom of the labor market (Albelda and Whithorn 2002:35).

Piven believes that the current welfare system has created an indentured servant class who are forced into often demeaning labor situations in order to financially support themselves. For both Piven and Ehrenreich, the problems with welfare and welfare reform extend far beyond a

domestic desire to instill a work–ethic in the poor to a global concerted effort by capital interests to create a docile work force at low and middle income levels. However, while this is unspoken by those in control, the same old ideological and value arguments are used to justify it. In contrast, Michel–Rolph Trouillot writes that by “Revamping old arguments in a new vocabulary, many explanations of poverty now blame the victims of globalization” (2003:57).

The increased power of capital to move beyond borders and therefore renegotiate the terms of labor in its favor, has occurred at the same time as the state claimed a lack of control over capital and the ability to rein in its excesses. Western world leaders, beginning in 1972, made conscious decisions that led to the deregulation and therefore increasing control and power global financial markets and financiers have over the economy. World leaders now claim that they are powerless to stop them. As Trouillot says, “More often than not, these claims are convenient shields for choices that protect capital accumulation” (2003:62).

In concert with this intentional abdication of power to capital interests, the United States’ federal government has given increasing control to state and local governments to administer social welfare programs and determine benefit levels and eligibility. This “New Federalism” manifests itself in the block grant provisions of PRWORA, putting welfare programs in danger of major budget cuts. In reducing welfare spending by one dollar, a state now saves that entire dollar, where previously, under the federal matching funds program, the state would save only 40 cents (Sawicky 1999:159). If O’Connor’s theory of a fiscal crisis of the state is correct, continuous and significant benefit reductions were inevitable.

Conclusion

Over the last 35 years, with the federal government’s aid, the capital markets assumed control over the economy, creating the current post–Fordist regime of accumulation and the

conditions of poverty and unemployment that have accompanied this shift. Likewise, Congress and the executive branch of the federal government have handed over control of the financing of the increasingly restricted welfare programs to relatively more conservative local and state governments who have responded to their own budget crises and ideologically opposed constituents by trimming benefits, stiffening sanctions, and decreasing eligibility. The scholarly research has clearly demonstrated this shift of power, as well as the move to a post-Fordist regime of accumulation that led to it and the attendant explosion of a popular conservative ideology. In reviewing this literature, I have attempted to provide an adequate theoretical and historical background in order to understand the changes in the welfare system and why they occurred at the national level.

Further research was conducted to examine how the outcome of these seismic changes to the economy and welfare policy were framed by newspaper editorials printed prior to the passing of PRWORA in 1996 and what this framing meant for the public's perception of welfare, poverty, and the government's role in solving related problems. Editorials from 1964, before the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act, were used as a basis for comparison, to demonstrate any differences in how poverty and welfare were represented by the popular media before the aforementioned changes. The following chapter describes the research design and methodology used in this study.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

One of the first steps in the research design process was determining the most appropriate and valid sources of texts that would provide an accurate view of how poverty, welfare, and government welfare policy were being thought of and talked about prior to the signing of the EOA and PRWORA. Editorials and op-ed pieces (hereafter “editorials”), as opposed to news stories, were selected for study because they can be seen as summaries of the ideology behind the decisions they consider and are more pointedly concerned with opinion. Izadi and Saghayebiria see these editorials as expressions of elite ideology which can be disseminated as a means to “organize, maintain, and stabilize particular forms of power relations” (2007:140). These texts can then be analyzed as a conceptual structure invoked in readers, “the worlds . . . they can consider real” (Krippendorff 2004:63). In other words, though elite newspaper editorials are not direct expressions of popular opinion, they can and do control how issues, especially those regarding complicated and unfamiliar national policy problems, are discussed in the media. Consequently, they influence how average readers begin to conceptualize the problems, their causes and solutions.

Sampling

Due to the nature of this study, a purposive (non-random, relevance) sampling technique was used in the selection of the texts, a common practice in studies of ongoing issues or controversies (Riffe, Lacy, Fico 2005:101). In doing discourse analysis, this often means that texts must be read and analyzed prior to being considered for the sample (Krippendorff 2004:119). The number of potential texts is systematically lowered by elimination until it reaches a manageable amount.

I chose the *New York Times* (NYT), *Washington Post* (WP) and *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) for this study based on their large circulation numbers as well as their respected coverage of national issues and events. These three newspapers have been termed “elite” and are thought to “serve an intermedia agenda setting function for other news sources” (Izadi and Saghaye–Biria 2007:148). Circulation of the *Wall Street Journal* is second in the United States only to USA Today, and is followed by the *New York Times* in third. The *Washington Post*, ranking number five, is known and respected for its attention to legislative and governmental issues, being located in the capital of Washington, DC (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2008).

In searching for editorials written about the Economic Opportunity Act, I chose January 8, 1964 as the start date for the search parameters, as this was the date that President Johnson officially presented his plan for a war on poverty to the nation in his State of the Union address. The search period ended on August 31, 1964, just 11 days after the bill was signed into law. Indexing methods varied for each of the three newspapers due to the age of the editorials and each source was searched separately for two search terms, “war on poverty” and “economic opportunity act.”

I searched the *New York Times* using their online archive search at www.newyorktimes.com. “Economic opportunity act” plus “editorial” resulted in one accurate hit, while a search for “war on poverty” plus “editorial” produced 35 additional texts, of which only two were actually editorials focused on national poverty and welfare issues. The *Washington Post*’s online archive search (www.washingtonpost.com) produced zero hits for “economic opportunity act” plus “editorial” and only one hit for “war on poverty” and “editorial.” As a result, I previewed the 245 hits returned when only “war on poverty” was searched and kept only those texts determined to be of an editorial nature for the sample.

The *Wall Street Journal*'s archives from 1964 are not available electronically but are available on microfiche and are searchable by a printed index of keywords. The terms "war on poverty" and "economic opportunity act" did not turn up any results, nor did "welfare." Numerous pieces were listed under the search term "poverty," and were indicated to be either editorials or news articles. From the editorial results, I then narrowed down my sample to include only those columns which specifically addressed poverty as it related to the recent government initiatives.

Editorials written about PRWORA were compiled using the Lexis–Nexis search engine. Though there was no logical external beginning date for texts in this search, I started the search parameters at January 1, 1996 so that the length of time searched for both 1996 and 1964 was approximately equivalent. Again, I ended the searched dates at August 31, 1996, little more than a week after Clinton signed PRWORA into law.

I initially searched the full text of all available texts for the aforementioned dates for all three newspapers using the search term "personal responsibility and work opportunity reconciliation act." This resulted in only three returned news articles, none of which were editorials. Secondly, I searched the term "welfare reform," resulting in hundreds of hits. These results were then further narrowed by adding the term "editorial" to the search, which produced a sufficient yet manageable number of hits from each of the three sources. The final step in selecting the 1996 texts for the sample involved reading each piece and discarding those whose primary focus was a topic other than "welfare reform." Most notably, this involved the elimination of editorials that mentioned welfare reform only in relation to the political impact its institution would have on President Clinton's reelection campaign and political legacy. A total

of 54 editorials remained in the sample for the period between January 1, 1996 and August 31, 1996.

Table 1. Number of editorials in sample from each source and year

	1964	1996	Both Years
New York Times	2	16	18
Wall Street Journal	10	6	16
Washington Post	5	32	37
Total	17	54	71

Questions for analysis

In reviewing and analyzing the texts, I looked for what was said in reference to the following three “survey” questions. The editorials’ “answers” were then combined within each text and across each sample year to construct coherent narratives of poverty and welfare as they were presented to readers.

First, what does the editorial portray as the primary problem in the area of poverty and welfare, if there is one identified at all? In answering this question, I attempted to understand what underlying issue provoked the editorial writer’s piece. Why was this text being written? Secondly, what does the editorial identify as the cause of this problem or issue it identifies? Specifically, did the writer make arguments for individual or structural origins of the problem? Lastly, what does the editorial portray as the federal government’s ideal role in and obligation toward ending the problem it identifies? Additionally, what other policy suggestions or criticisms were made and how did they reflect the answers to the first two questions?

The information provided by the editorials, in light of prior scholarly research on the impact of the media on public opinion and policy (Druckman and Nelson 2003, Druckman and Parkin 2005, Herman and Chomsky 1988), was used to answer broader research questions. Namely, how did public perception of poverty and the poor change from the 1960s to the 1990s? How did public welfare programs come to be seen as a cause of poverty instead of a solution to it? And specifically, to what extent did the news media encourage and facilitate this shift in public opinion? The following chapters attempt to provide answers to the questions through a critical analysis of the sample texts.

Chapter Four: 1964

In reading the editorials from the 1964 sample, I expected to find a consensus about the existence and extent of poverty, and general support for the war on poverty programs in theory, if not in execution. The editorials, however, varied wildly from source to source on the perceived extent of the poverty problem, as well as on what action should be taken. These differences are reviewed and discussed in this chapter.

Despite their differences, I found that the editorials shared one common idea that differentiates them from the 1996 sample. Each editorial assumes that the economy would indefinitely continue its upswing, providing job growth that would eventually make poverty nearly obsolete. An analysis of this assumption and its impact on poverty discourse concludes the chapter.

Defining the problem

Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* editorials assumed that the existence of poverty, and its status as a paramount domestic problem, was evident to their readers. Neither newspaper offers much evidence of the poverty they know to exist but they continually remark on its severity, especially in light of the nation's general economic wellbeing. The following quote from the *New York Times* is typical of the way the prevalence of poverty is represented by the two newspapers.

President Johnson's declaration of a war on poverty has served as a compelling reminder to many Americans that millions of their fellow citizens are existing in a bleak netherland of hopelessness in the midst of unprecedented prosperity. The very fact that the United States has produced mass affluence while maintaining something close to mass poverty is an uncomfortably formidable challenge. (June 24, 1964)

Likewise, the *Washington Post* notes the “persistence of privation and want in a society characterized by growing affluence” (January 27, 1964). The same editorial goes on to briefly mention the number of families living with annual incomes below \$3000 as its proof of this privation and want.

Though the existence of poverty may seem self-evident in the United States to the editors of these two sources, even the assumption of poverty and its prevalence are impacted by the editorial viewpoint of a newspaper, and consequently how its readers view reality. Unlike the widespread misery that the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* wrote about, the *Wall Street Journal* and its editorial writers can find little to no real poverty of which to speak, and they challenge their readers to go out and find the poor that supposedly exist. Vermont Royster writes:

. . . spend a few days in one of the slums in New York, or any other of our great cities. There, believe us, you will find poverty by the standards of the greater part of the nation. But there also, believe us, you will find the tempest-tossed from other lands to whom this “poverty” is something they fled to from something far worse . . . And while you are thus journeying, try one across your own country. . . then ask yourself if a fifth of the nation is, really, ground down in the hopeless circle of poverty (March 26, 1964).

Here, the poverty problem is minimized for readers by making it a matter of visibility. This argument is the counterpoint to other media outlets’ championing of *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, the best selling book that addressed the increasing isolation of the poor (Eve Edstrom, *Washington Post*, January 19, 1964). Poverty that is found in the United States can thus be explained away by noting its relativity. Since our poor would be considered rich by the standards of the developing world, they therefore are not objectively poor at all.

More subtle, and more disturbing, are the racist implications of the above quote. It can be read to imply that others who came to this country, namely African Americans whose relatives were slaves brought from Africa, are ungrateful for the advantages that their ancestors' passage gave them, unlike more recent European immigrants who appreciate what the United States has to offer. Poor urban blacks, and likewise, poor rural whites can become an ungrateful, greedy enemy to hard work and individualism when compared to the destitution of Eastern Europe or the Third World.

Additionally, the *Wall Street Journal* invokes readers' cynicism about politics as a means of raising doubts about the legitimacy of the "poverty problem." Vermont Royster writes: "You can hardly pick up a newspaper or tune in a TV set without hearing about this blight of poverty. Almost everybody knows this is a distorted image but hardly anybody dares say so for fear of being damned as a heartless wretch. This is what makes the poverty boom such a marvelous political ploy" (*Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 1964). *Wall Street Journal* readers are given a vision of reality in which contradictory elements are unified seamlessly. In this view, there is little to no actual poverty. What poverty does exist is simply poverty in relation to mass prosperity and therefore not really poverty at all. The issue of poverty in the midst of plenty is merely a cynical political ploy by a liberal Democratic president. If readers do not believe this version of reality the editorials suggest, they are encouraged to drive around their town and look themselves for these nonexistent poor people. The result is that the reality for the readership of this newspaper is a world in which the EOA, or any government antipoverty program, is unnecessary and should be opposed.

In contrast, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* offer recitations of the same income statistics to back up their claims of widespread suffering. This begs the question why

neither paper felt it necessary to offer further “proof” of poverty’s presence in the United States, in contrast to the *Wall Street Journal*’s “proof” of its absence, instead writing with the assumption that it does exist to the extent that it is a major domestic problem. Do both newspapers assume that their readers are familiar with the issue? It is most likely that the problem of poverty needs little explanation or defense because of the ample news articles and television news stories devoted to the topic as well as the popularity of books like *The Other America*.

The prevalence of ostensibly objective news information on the war on poverty may also explain why there were more editorials written in the *Wall Street Journal* on the topics of poverty and welfare than in the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* combined. The *Wall Street Journal* had the task of convincing its readership that what was being presented on the evening news, in popular books, in other newspapers, and by their own President was misleading and inaccurate. Some of these editorials seek mainly to refocus the discussion on the media and politician’s exaggeration of the problem. They are an explicit attempt to reconstruct the problem in a way that allows for the blaming of politicians and other media. The editorials can then also deny the need for interest or action on the part of the audience. If readers come away with the idea that there is no problem with poverty in the United States, they can reject any attempts to solve it.

Causes of poverty

When mentioning the causes of this poverty epidemic, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* almost universally cited the failure of the education system and other government institutions to prepare the populace for the industrialized economy. Roscoe Drummond writes in the *Washington Post*, “This kind of poverty is not due to the failure of our

economic system. It is due to the failure of our society to provide the education, the job training and re-training, the encouragement and the environment needed to help the poor become productive and the productive become more prosperous” (April 15, 1964). This is not to say that the writer believes that all poverty will be abolished with a well-educated and trained population. It is only this widespread destitution in the midst of plenty, so different from the poverty of the Depression, that can be cured with the proposed opportunity-based programs.

While advancing an argument for structural causes of poverty, there are scattered references to a lack of discipline or will, as well as undeservingness, on the part of the poor. This results, they argue, in some remaining in poverty no matter what action the federal government takes. Despite these mentions, the two newspapers tell a story of poor Americans who are trapped in poverty mostly due to their limited education and skill. Yet emphasizing that some of the poor will never rise up due to their own unwillingness to play by the rules ensures that those in power are shielded from accountability when and if their plans fail. That is, if the war on poverty programs that the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* support are failing to lift large numbers of people from below the poverty line, it is because many people clearly do not *want* to be out of poverty.

Again, the *Wall Street Journal* offers a contradictory view, focusing mainly on the behavior of the poor and resisting attempts to fault macro structures and institutions for persistent poverty. William Henry Chamberlin accuses Johnson and his policies of ignoring the “essential dynamo,” that is, “the presence, in the individual character, of the element of will to take advantage of opportunities, however limited, to treat obstacles as spurs to achievement” (August 11, 1964). In sum, there are plenty of opportunities already for the poor to lift themselves out of poverty — they just have to want it badly enough.

With some columns framing the existence of mass poverty in the United States as a media creation, or blaming its existence on the poor themselves, the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page also lauded poverty for being a positive character building exercise, using Abraham Lincoln as an example of someone whose poverty proved “useful.” Even if readers can accept the existence of poverty that they cannot see for themselves, and can sympathize with the poor even though their poverty is not on par with that of the Third World, they must at least be able to admit that poverty can be beneficial. After all, Chamberlin writes, “it would not require any exhaustive research to turn up thousands of instances of individuals who emerged from early poverty to business and professional success” and who go on to credit their early struggles as beneficial (*Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 1964). The *Wall Street Journal* made real for its readers a society in which there actually is no poverty except that of those who are poor by *choice*, making the “problem” of poverty in an affluent society no problem at all.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have presented to their readers a serious poverty problem caused by the failure of the education system and requiring the sympathy (and guilt) of the public. However, they are assured that some will always remain in poverty due to their unwillingness to adopt mainstream values and habits. The brief nature of these remarks does not diminish their ability to undercut the idea that there should be public responsibility to assist those in poverty. Yet the editorials do not fail to mention that an unknowable number of these poor people are actually to blame for their own poverty, making it easier to minimize or ignore their plight.

Government action

Only the two editorials in the *New York Times* were clear and straightforward about what was needed to reduce poverty, namely, more government programs and entitlements. The

newspaper was supportive of the Economic Opportunity Act, criticizing it only for its limited scope and simultaneously calling for the “expansion of other needed public services” (July 21, 1964). They strongly supported increasing federal government involvement and funding for myriad other welfare benefits. The following quote not only summarizes the *New York Times*’ position, but demonstrates the forcefulness with which it calls for this strengthening of the welfare state:

Winning the war on poverty calls for a multiple offensive employing all the measures now available. It is essential to sustain economic growth that can help open up new opportunities and to prevent any rise in the numbers below the poverty line. The Government’s housing and welfare programs must be expanded, and the plan to provide medical care for the aged enacted.

Success also will demand special measures requiring more imagination and larger resources than the Administration is deploying. If the campaign is to be more than an appealing battle cry in an election year, it will have to make a much more intensive effort to improve educational facilities and enlarge needed public services. These can open up opportunities for the young, create jobs, and enhance individual dignity.

Even then the Administration will only be conducting a partial war. It has completely overlooked the plight of those aged 65 or older who head 3.2 million families in the ranks of the poor. They cannot be removed from poverty by training or public works; but they can be elevated above the poverty line without any lengthy reconnaissance or elaborate strategy. It will take direct cash payments — a solution that the Administration has not yet contemplated despite its propaganda barrage.

The President’s sincerity is manifest. But the war against poverty cannot be won on the cheap. It will take a concerted attack, involving long and costly battles. (June 24, 1964)

While I anticipated finding this strong support for the war on poverty initiatives, and more generally for increased federal involvement in welfare and poverty relief, throughout all three

sources, the support from the *Washington Post* editorials was more subdued and tempered by statements criticizing policies that aimed to redistribute wealth. The editorials universally praised Johnson's efforts to "help the poor help themselves" without "increasing handouts to decrease distress" (Roscoe Drummond, April 15, 1964). The lack of wealth redistribution programs in the new war on poverty becomes evidence, for writer Walter Lippman, of a positive new historical milieu. The Kennedy and Johnson approaches to poverty eradication recognize that the economic pie is limitless in size, and that government poverty policy must work in concert with fiscal policy whose aim should always be to continually increase the size of this pie by allowing capitalism to flourish (*Washington Post*, March 19, 1964).

This concentration on capital investment, however, requires a combined effort with education and training programs to create a workforce to man the jobs that will be created. The *Washington Post's* editorials neither gave support to the idea of "handouts" nor even mentioned aid to those who were either unable to work or found themselves still unemployed despite their new training. While it placed the blame for poverty squarely on poor education and illiteracy — the structural failure of the United States education system — its suggested correction for this failure would eventually place the onus back on the individual. As long as the federal government could claim that individuals have the opportunity for advancement through education in an ever-growing economy, any failure to escape poverty becomes personal. The *Washington Post* has restructured the problem and its solution for its readers so that eventually individual blame for poverty is logical. If readers support the EOA, and it is enacted, the only remaining poor will be those who are unmotivated to take advantages of the opportunities they have been given and are therefore, undeserving of further help. In sum, the EOA cannot fail to eliminate poverty, because any remaining poverty after the programs are implemented can be

blamed on the poor. This newspaper has created a false dichotomy, eliminating any other potential influences like the economy, on an increase or decrease in poverty.

As could be surmised based on the newspaper's stance on the existence and causes of poverty, as well as its belief in the lack of structural barriers to universal prosperity in the United States, the *Wall Street Journal* is highly critical of the Economic Opportunity Act, both in its logistics and in its underlying assumptions. One editorial states “. . . the Federal officialdom is inherently incapable of devising and administering effective programs applicable to all parts of a diverse nation” (July 28, 1964). Work programs are faulted for having an “aura of make-work” (March 17, 1964). The programs as a whole are called “ill-defined,” and the entire effort, “splintered” (Harley L. Lutz, April 15, 1964).

Yet these ill-defined programs are only symptoms of the government overstepping its duties. One column in the *Wall Street Journal* that most clearly demonstrates the paper's general editorial outlook on the role of government states “. . . promoting the general welfare was never intended to endorse what has come to be understood as the federally subsidized welfare state” (February 14, 1964). Another *Wall Street Journal* editorial by Harley L. Lutz identifies five areas of government involvement that need correction, including abolishing the minimum wage, reducing the corporate tax burden, ending support for labor unions, and ending any entitlement to welfare benefits. For Lutz, “A bona fide Government attack on poverty must include, therefore, modification of the rules and bureaucratic attitudes which hamper the provision and efficient use of capital” (*Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 1964). This attitude — that government's primary duty is to ensure the unfettered operation of capitalism, followed by preparing and maintaining its needed workforce — though hardly marginal, could not yet be considered mainstream. By constructing the ideal role of government as primarily a giver of corporate welfare as a form of

public welfare, the *Wall Street Journal* legitimized this view for its readership and expanded its reach years before it become either a popular notion or a reality.

Analysis

I had anticipated finding a general consensus in the opinions expressed in the 1964 editorials, with perhaps some dissenting views printed in each newspaper in the interest of fairness. While I did not expect every editorial to celebrate Johnson's efforts and uncritically accept the war on poverty as manifested in the EOA, I assumed that there would be in all of the sample sources at least some tacit acceptance that there existed a problem of widespread poverty in the United States and that the federal government had some responsibility to change this.

While this sentiment was most fully and forcefully expressed by the *New York Times*, that newspaper printed only two editorials on the subject, even though 209 news articles made mention of the term "war on poverty" over the same time period. I can find no sure reason as to why so little editorial coverage was given to a topic that was so obviously important and newsworthy. Did the *New York Times* assume that their editorial position was already shared by most of their readership? Was this position articulated more subtly, and perhaps more effectively, in its news stories? The reason for the lack of editorial coverage may be equally as informative as what the editorials themselves had to say, though determining this is beyond the scope of this study.

The *Wall Street Journal's* call for understanding poverty as individual in nature was unsurprising given its audience of businessmen, bankers, and financial industry workers. However, I did not expect to find any editorials in this earlier sample which espoused so completely a position that I located as emerging strongly only after 1973 — namely that government welfare policy should limit itself to programs that provide for the corporate, and not

public, welfare with the belief that a properly functioning capitalist system benefits all who work hard. Though seemingly still a minority opinion at the time, this idea found full articulation over a series of ten editorials in the eight months before the EOA, a vast expansion of the federal welfare state, became law.

As noticeable and important as these differences in position among the sources are, what is most striking is the one assumption that binds them all and influences the vision of the future readers are left with and what this future means for welfare policy. This shared assumption is the inevitability of unlimited future economic expansion which means ever-increasing standards of living for all. It is stated explicitly, and in no uncertain terms, by editorials in two sources.

Walter Lippman writes:

But in this generation, one might say in the past thirty years, a revolutionary idea has taken hold in the advanced countries of the world. The size of the pie to be divided can be increased by invention, organization, capital investment, and fiscal policy, and then a whole society, not just one part of it, will grow richer. . .

The Kennedy–Johnson campaign against poverty operates in this historical context. The basic assumption is that the American economy can readily produce the means to reduce poverty — which was estimated as the lot of one-third of the nation when Franklin Roosevelt took office and is now down to one-fifth (*Washington Post*, March 19, 1964).

Chamberlin writes in the *Wall Street Journal*:

The social and economic history of the United States shows a pattern of ever improving living standards, always touching a higher peak, even after intervening setbacks. There is no reason to doubt that this pattern will continue indefinitely, barring some unforeseeable and improbable catastrophe like a nuclear attack. (March 20, 1964).

Even when there is no mention of economic growth within an editorial, this assumption still informs the policy discussion therein. For the *Wall Street Journal* this translates into the belief that no government welfare programs are necessary, only policy that encourages capital expansion. If enough new jobs are made available, anyone willing to work will have the opportunity to do so. The poverty problem would then take care of itself. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* come to a different conclusion. It is the government's responsibility to do everything in its power, including ending discrimination and financing training programs, in order to help people take advantage of this national prosperity.

Regardless of their positions on policy, by promoting the idea that the economy and living standards would continue their upswing, the newspapers helped to lay the groundwork for the individualist arguments against comprehensive welfare policies that emerged in earnest later. Pointing to evidence in the media of an ever-growing economy (with expanded job opportunities), and of new training or education programs being enacted by the federal government, regardless of whether or not these opportunities existed to an appreciable degree, one could begin to make the argument that poverty really is a case of "slothfully missed" chances to improve one's lot (Mink and Solinger 2003:337). Though the editorial discourse leading up to the passing of the Economic Opportunity Act varied in its identification of the problems and its causes, as well as the proposed solutions, the effect of the editorials' common assumption was to encourage the future strengthening of the belief in poverty as the unwillingness of some to subscribe to the mainstream American value of hard work.

Chapter Five: 1996

The sample of 1996 editorials offered a nearly even distribution of those who favored the passage of PRWORA and those who opposed it. Despite the difference in opinion on this particular welfare reform bill, there was widespread condemnation of current welfare policy as well as the assignment of responsibility for a host of social ills to the growth of the welfare rolls. This near consensus on the evils of AFDC meant that readers of these editorials were exposed to a limited discussion of alternatives to the dominant view. The discourse was overwhelmingly one-sided, with little representation from voices that fingered global economic changes as a central cause of poverty and the continued necessity of welfare. In this chapter I discuss the nature of this limited discourse and its effect on the public's perception of what welfare, in the form of AFDC, had accomplished since its inception sixty-one years earlier.

Defining the problem

While the 1964 editorials concerned themselves with the proliferation of poverty, or the media and President's exaggeration of the extent of poverty, the focus of the 1996 discourse was the system intended to aid those poor. Those both for and against welfare reform as represented by PRWORA overwhelmingly found fault with the current Aid to Families with Dependent Children cash assistance program, in place under various names and incarnations since the New Deal. Douglas Besharov's headline in the *Wall Street Journal* succinctly sums up many of the editorials' arguments: "Welfare: An Albatross for Young Mothers" (February 28, 1996).

It was the *Wall Street Journal* that most forcefully made the claim that the modern problem was no longer how to get people out of poverty, but how to get people off the welfare

rolls. It is referred to by Will Marshall, president of the Democratic Leadership Council's Progressive Policy Institute, as both an "unreformable system" and "flawed beyond repair," exemplifying a "dysfunctional bureaucracy that flouts [Americans'] values and feeds a self-perpetuating culture of poverty" (August 1, 1996). Another editorial states: "To wit, the current welfare system ruins the lives of the recipients" (*Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 1996).

To further this claim, George Melloan positions the United States' problems with welfare as part of a larger global rejection of "welfare politics." Though it is in the United States, where the welfare state is targeted towards those of lesser means, that the issue of fairness becomes paramount. He writes, "Public confidence in the ability of the state to deliver economic security with justice is diminishing everywhere" (*Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 1996), likening the situation in the United States to the changes occurring to Germany's incomparable universal social benefit system.

A majority of the *Washington Post*'s editorialists, though largely against the passage of the welfare reform bill, agreed that AFDC was itself a problem, even though PRWORA was not the solution. William Raspberry writes, "What gets lost in our anguished argument is that welfare was broken and we couldn't figure out how, starting with the present system, to fix it" (August 8, 1996). Raspberry's argument is repeatedly asserted throughout columns in both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* that urge the vetoing of PROWRA:

The current system may not do much for work, self-respect, family, or self-discipline (Colbert I. King, *Washington Post*, July 27, 1996).

No one — or very few, anyway — would argue that the current welfare system is a good one. Mr. Clinton was and remains right to try to change it (*Washington Post*, July 25, 1996).

Of course the welfare system needs replacing (E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Washington Post*, July 23, 1996).

The current welfare system has no defenders (*Washington Post*, July 18, 1996).

To find serious fault with the House and Senate bill is not to deny the need for reform (*New York Times*, July 25, 1996).

We must turn away from the failed system (David T. Ellwood, *New York Times*, July 22, 1996).

This is not to say that there was no recognition of poverty as being a valid and pressing social problem. Numerous editorials in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* dropped the oft-quoted statistic of a possible one million more children falling into poverty with the passing of PRWORA (Daniel P. Moynihan, *Washington Post*, August 4, 1996; Isabel Sawhill, *Washington Post*, July 26, 1996; *New York Times*, August 1, 1996; David T. Ellwood, *New York Times*, July 22, 1996). E.J. Dionne, Jr., writing after Clinton signed the bill into law, hoped that, “Perhaps we can finally talk about the issue that mattered all along: how to reduce poverty, joblessness, illegitimacy, and crime” (*Washington Post*, August 5, 1996). Yet this acknowledgment was rare.

Dionne’s statement is a recognition of one of the central assumptions of the PRWORA discourse — that welfare dependency is at the heart of poverty, crime, out of wedlock births, and other “urban pathologies.” For those framing the discussion in 1996, poverty, once considered the disease, becomes only a symptom of the greater ill of welfare, regardless of which side of the welfare reform debate one stands on. Establishing welfare, and its “abuses” (*Washington Post*, August 29, 1996), as the concern of these editorials has the effect of automatically strengthening the argument for welfare reform in any incarnation. Public perception of the need for changes to the current system, as wrong-headed as policy experts and social scientists may claim those changes are, are inevitable if those same experts declare the current situation untenable.

As a *Washington Post* editorial said, the current welfare system had “no defenders” (July 18, 1996), even within a perceived liberal media organization (*Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 1996). If this is true, further arguments to sustain it become, in the public’s eyes, illogical.

Opponents of welfare reform, along with its supporters, have presented their cases in such a way that the reader is left with little choice but to find serious fault with AFDC and to advocate for a fundamental change to the program, at the expense of attention to the condition of poverty that initially made AFDC necessary. Thus, these editorials may well have helped to shape a public perception of welfare as a *cause* of social ill, not as a remedy to it.

Causes of poverty

Not every editorial blamed the welfare system for the dependence, poverty, teen pregnancy and the like, though such dissenting voices were certainly in the minority. For the most part, they found themselves almost exclusively published in the *New York Times*. An editorial page review of William Julius Wilson's latest book claims: "Mr. Wilson argues persuasively that urban social pathologies are related not to declining values, but to the disappearance of jobs and the social coherence they provide . . . the poor are sealed off from both jobs and information about them" (August 25, 1996). Additionally, there is mention of the "job shortage for low-skilled workers" due to deindustrialization (Bob Herbert, August 5, 1996), a changing economy that the federal government did not prepare for or effectively respond to (Sheldon Danziger, February 23, 1996), and the belief that "the economic prospects of [welfare recipients] have been diminished by labor market changes, global competition, and technological advances" (June 1, 1996).

There were a limited number of editorials that even mentioned the possibility of larger structural forces like globalization and deindustrialization playing a part in the failure of the government to eradicate, or even reduce, poverty under the current system of welfare programs. Instead, writers overwhelmingly expressed the belief that welfare itself is a social problem that spawned, and then operated to encourage, other social problems. It does so by disincentivizing,

even punishing, the values that Americans hold dear, such as hard work, marriage and personal responsibility.

This quote excerpted below, from Will Marshall's editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, makes the claim that the public needs no convincing that welfare has become a cause of poverty:

To most Americans, however, the sky has already fallen. They view the current welfare system as flawed beyond repair because it fails to promote the right values: work, marriage, parental responsibility. Whereas professional advocates portray welfare as a benign "safety net" for the poor, the public rightly sees it as a trap that smothers initiative, instills passivity and dependence, and isolates the poor in a public subsistence economy rather than offering them real opportunities to become productive and self sufficient" (August 1, 1996).

More than once in this column, Marshall asserts that the "overwhelming majority" of Americans agree with his own views on welfare. In doing this, just as other editorials presented welfare as *obviously* the problem, he makes his points seem inarguable, despite offering no evidence to support them. How can readers disagree with the majority of their fellow citizens, who, they are being told, see the problems of welfare as self-evident? The assumptions that undergird the writers' opinions about welfare are presented as unassailable facts, leaving readers with the understanding that welfare is almost universally considered the cause of poverty, and the reason that the poor reject their own mainstream values.

Marshall's piece, of course, is just one of many that express the same belief — that it is the specifics of the current welfare policy that exacerbates the problems welfare legislation was created to solve. The following quotes are examples of the language used to describe bad deeds of the welfare system:

[Welfare] is a perfect formula for moral and ethical irresponsibility (Robert C. Waterbury, *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 1996).

The welfare system discourages work, encourages dependence, and can foster family breakdown (*New York Times* July 25, 1996).

[Welfare reform] would put an end to the policy of something for nothing, of penalizing work and marriage, and isolating the poor from the economic and cultural mainstream (Joseph I. Lieberman, *New York Times*, July 25, 1996).

Welfare subsidizes and helps sustain illegitimacy; it is illegitimacy's economic life-support system (William J. Bennett, *Washington Post*, August 18, 1996).

What is important about these statements is their assumption of a causal relationship between welfare and unemployment. Just as the 1964 sample editorials announced that a lack of education and training was preventing full employment while presenting little to no evidence to support this assertion, many of the 1996 columns do the same, relying not on factual evidence, but on readers' sense of fairness and morality as a means of "proving" the insidious nature of welfare. This is further aided by the credentials of those who wrote these editorials. Senators, governors, and well known columnists all spoke of the horrors of welfare. No sane reader could think of supporting a system that "rewards moral irresponsibility" (Robert C. Waterbury, *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 1996), "discourages work" (*New York Times*, July 25, 1996), or contributes to out-of-wedlock births (George Melloan, *Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 1996).

In framing their problems with welfare policy as a moral issue (and welfare recipients as immoral or as having values different from most Americans) instead of a complicated confluence of history, policy, and economics, these editorial writers have reduced the issue for their readers to a basic question of right or wrong. As both Izadi and Saghaye-Biria (2007) and Krippendorff (2004) described, readers rely on elite media to simplify and condense complicated or confusing issues and to help construct their reality for them. These newspapers built public

support for the dismantling of the federal welfare state through the creation of a reality in which welfare was the origination of all things offensive to their readers' moral sensibilities. Even those writers who objected to PRWORA's "reforms" contributed to this support by their insistence that it was this particular bill that was so odious, but that some type of reform was necessary.

Government action

Complementing this conception of welfare recipients as lazy, dependent, and unwilling to work, most of the editorials (in all three sources) that made policy suggestions recommended "responsibility" requirements on the part of recipients. This usually came in the form of mandatory employment. William Raspberry writes in the *Washington Post*, "Philosophically, the notion that welfare recipients ought to work is an easy sell" (August 19, 1996). Others agreed:

It makes sense to transform the welfare office from a place where people go to sign up for checks to a center where the poor and jobless can turn to find work (*Washington Post*, February 10, 1996).

We must turn away from the failed system focused on determining eligibility and check writing and create a new one based on work and responsibility (David T. Ellwood, *New York Times*, July 22, 1996).

Enactment of PRWORA would be a first step toward replacing the unconditional welfare entitlement with a new social compact based on work and mutual responsibility (*Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 1996).

Where the editorials writers did disagree was in the amount of federal government involvement and funds needed to support job growth and placement after the requirements took effect. It was this point that caused the divergence in opinion over whether or not PRWORA would be an effective reform of welfare. Yet, among both sides of the debate, there were expressions in

support of lessening the federal government's role. Melloan writes in the *Wall Street Journal* that "It is another step toward the devolution of federal power over social services. That process is already underway in response to popular demand" (July 29, 1996).

A *New York Times* editorial calling PRWORA "atrocious" nevertheless still suggests that, "There is also nothing inherently wrong with a bill that wants states to take more control over welfare-to-work programs and impose time limits on cash assistance" (August 1, 1996). Statements lamenting this devolution were limited. Yet they generally bemoaned the dismantling of the New Deal created safety net. Mary McGrory writes, "The tie that bound the central government to the pauper in the ghetto has been cut" (*Washington Post*, August 1, 1996).

Even those in favor of PRWORA have presented federal devolution as an unstoppable process, already well underway at the public's behest. Those opposed to the bill think that state control could be the reform that is needed, as evidenced by the pre-PRWORA success of Wisconsin's welfare reform effort. Statements to this effect, combined with the presentation of welfare programs as the cause of our modern social problems, lends credence to the public perception of the federal government as a bureaucratic morass, incompetent and even harmful. Just as President Clinton signed the bill into law despite having serious reservations about some of its provisions, even its opponents spoke of the necessity of a quick and fundamental change to the system.

Analysis

As in the 1964 sample, there was a lack of any consensus in 1996 on not only whether or not the passing of PRWORA was wise, but what the consequences would be for the nation. It would either throw one million more children into poverty or provide "hope for poor Americans" (Joseph I. Lieberman, *New York Times*, July 25, 1996). As in the earlier editorials, it was the

common assumptions, and the extent to which they were stressed and repeated, that were most evocative and influential in shaping public discourse and opinion on the problems of welfare and poverty in the United States. Though the editorials in this sample were ostensibly about the ability of PRWORA to adequately “reform” welfare, what stood out from the writings on both sides of the debate was the nearly universal agreement that the current system in place, and the growth it underwent beginning in 1964, was a cause of the severe rise of social problems such as crime or out-of-wedlock childbirth over the intervening thirty-two years and was therefore in desperate need of change.

The strength of the language the writers used, and the harshness of their condemnation of AFDC, described a situation to the reader that seemed to call for an immediate revamping of the federal welfare state. Franklin D. Roosevelt, in speaking about his first New Deal programs that laid the groundwork for AFDC, said: “It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.” In seeking to dismantle these same programs, writers implicitly invoked this philosophy by describing what they saw as the horrors of welfare in such certain terms that readers would not hesitate to admit that any change was a positive change and should be tried immediately. Even if reform failed, its failure could not worsen an already deplorable situation.

Invoking his family’s own personal experiences with the welfare system to justify his position, Robert C. Waterbury describes the situation of his granddaughter and her mother who is, with four children, “married to our federally sponsored welfare system.” He believes this system has cared for her better than his son could. She enjoys public housing, cash, food stamps, as well as health and dental care that would be lost to her were she to marry his son, ending the “illegitimacy” of her children. Mr. Waterbury sees the “fatherless children scuffling about” the

housing project and “fear[s] the effects of a childhood without the guidance, support, and strength of a father’s consistent presence” (*Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 1996). This anecdotal tale of woe by a concerned grandfather is explicitly aimed at invoking the sympathy of the reader for the children who are the innocent victims of a failed federal welfare system. The “culture of dependency,” Waterbury claims, could even affect your family as it did his, making reform something that suddenly every hard-working American should be concerned with.

More strong words on the problems with AFDC and other welfare programs such as public housing come from Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman. He writes: “[Welfare] makes it possible for a young woman (too often a teen-age girl) to have a child, move away from home, get an apartment, and survive — without working” (*New York Times*, July 25, 1996). His position as a well-known politician gives his opinion particular heft in an atmosphere with so many voices competing for the public’s attention and agreement. Likewise, a promise from the governor of Massachusetts that “states won’t be cruel” (William Weld, *New York Times*, February 9, 1996) if given control over their own welfare programs, or from Bill Bennett that “things have to change if we are to avoid social ruin” (*Washington Post*, August 18, 1996) are particularly effective in shaping the reality of welfare and its consequences for the reader. These are the voices of men in power, and with ostensibly more knowledge about these issues than the average reader. Simply having their names and qualifications in the byline adds legitimacy, and therefore influence, to their words.

Newspaper editorials in the months preceding PRWORA’s passage continued the job begun in the 1960s of convincing the public of the individual nature of poverty. The dominant view was not of a poverty caused by globalization, off-shoring, or shifting fiscal policy, but rather of poverty due to the personal moral and ethical failure of those who found themselves

dependent on an irresponsible welfare system that encouraged these behaviors. Of the fifty-four texts in the 1996 sample, less than ten percent even mentioned economic or market forces as the primary cause of modern poverty, and most of these were in a single source, the *New York Times*. Regular readers of the *Washington Post* or *Wall Street Journal* may never even have encountered editorial content that did not fault the welfare system for intergenerational poverty or the absence of a work ethic, to name some of the problems blamed on AFDC.

Those who read and trusted newspaper editorials to offer informed and fair views on PRWORA were left with a singular opinion — the federally controlled welfare system of the prior sixty-one years was an abject failure that had come to cause the problems that it was established to solve. Swift and fundamental change was imperative.

Conclusion

In their study on media images of the poor in the post welfare reform era, Bullock, Wyche, and Williams write:

In their many forms, media have the potential to educate, raise consciousness, and shape public attitudes (Kinder, 1998). This power to influence our beliefs may be particularly strong when highly politicized issues, such as affirmative action, the death penalty, or public assistance, are considered. Readers or viewers may be limited in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of the stories they read or the images they view without direct personal experience or specific background knowledge of an issue (2001:229–230).

This is especially true of newspaper editorials which, by their nature, seek to influence, not inform. The authors continue: “It seems likely that the dominant, destructive images of the 1980’s and early 1990’s contributed to public support for welfare ‘reform’ particularly among middle–class European Americans” (2001:237).

In this thesis, I extended this idea, theorizing that the influence of editorials played a role in the public’s support for the passage of the two most fundamental changes to welfare policy since the New Deal. The way that these issues were framed by the editorials ignored the substantive issues surrounding and influencing the proposed government policies, including the economy, in favor of simplistic individualistic explanations for poverty and welfare dependence that encouraged support for the EOA and PRWORA. Such policies allowed for the blaming of the poor for their own problems and allowed the federal government to escape blame for past and future failure.

The 1964 discourse offered two opposing conceptions of the present problem. There was either too much poverty in the United States or there was too much talk of poverty in the United States when little to none actually existed. Whether or not the writers supported the EOA based upon their perception of the problem, they located the solution in both assistance to individuals to overcome their personal deficiency in skill or education as well as liberal government fiscal policy that encouraged capital growth. Of course, this all hinged on the assumption that the present rate of economic growth and job creation would continue indefinitely.

There was little discussion of changing the terms of cash benefit programs, which were assumed to become essentially obsolete once full (or near full) employment was reached thanks to a combination of both the EOA's new training programs and the anticipated job growth. The 1964 editorials were still impressing upon their readers that the post World War II economic boom was not part of a cycle of ups and downs but evidence of the potential for and likelihood of unlimited future growth.

Consequently, those who remained poor after these training programs were initiated and jobs were made available could be seen as unwilling to work themselves out of poverty and thus deserving of it. Newspaper editorials in the months before the passage of the EOA shaped the public perception of poverty as a problem simply of lack of education and training. If the proposed programs failed to reduce poverty, Americans could commence blaming the poor who failed to take advantage of the opportunities they were given. In suggesting that better education and job training, under the guise of EOA programs like the Job Corps, was the panacea for poverty, these writers contributed to the shaping of what became the dominant public belief — that poverty represents the individual's moral failure to subscribe to the values of hard work and

sacrifice. Despite a changing economic landscape and diminished job availability, this belief persisted through the 1990s.

By the time PRWORA was introduced, with 13.7 percent of Americans still in poverty, the conventional wisdom stated that the poor were lazy, unwilling to work, and suffering due to their rejection of mainstream American values. While the idea was certainly not new (see Murray 1984), it is presented in many of the sample editorials as a foregone conclusion that the federal welfare system is no longer a source of poverty relief but rather the cause of behaviors that keep people in poverty. Even those who opposed PRWORA agreed that welfare reform of some type was necessary. Despite quibbling over the specifics of the bill — namely, its lack of provision for funds, training, and jobs for former AFDC recipients — the editorial writers were nearly unanimous in their condemnation of welfare as a failed system that incentivized the poor to behave in ways that are personally and socially destructive. Consequently, their readership is left with the only logical conclusion, that the dismantling of the welfare state is vital to ending entrenched poverty and welfare dependence, ensuring their support of PROWRA.

The editorials, in their demonization of the current welfare system, also perpetuated the idea that addressing poverty means addressing the deficiencies of the individual. While this meant, in 1964, providing increased training and education, by 1996 it meant ending government assistance in order to spur recipients to take “personal responsibility” for their situations. There is a marked lack of recognition of the structural barriers to ending poverty. Likewise, there is no mention of the fact that these barriers did not arise in a vacuum but were the result of intentional government decisions throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The editorials in the 1964 sample — whether due to willfull ignorance or simply naïve optimism — created a reality for readers in which well-paying Fordist jobs were readily

available to all (regardless of race or sex) and their numbers would continue to grow with the government's support of capital accumulation and provision of corporate welfare in addition to public welfare. They imagined a scenario that allowed for only one possible outcome — the eventual blame of those who failed to get out of poverty due to their own laziness and unwillingness to work.

In the years between the EOA and PRWORA debates, the formulated reality of the 1964 editorials became abjectly unreal. The 1970s brought a stagnant economy, the oil crisis, inflation, and the beginning of the end for the manufacturing sector in the United States. When the welfare system that was in place failed to reduce poverty and suffering in the face of these new challenges, it opened the door for the ideological assault of conservative academic literature (and a media that mimicked its talking points) contributing to the mainstreaming of the anti welfare arguments that grew in popularity in the 1980s.

The introduction of PRWORA could have steered the discourse towards a discussion of these economic changes and government policy decisions, and what they meant for the poor and unskilled. However, editorials instead focused on the failure of welfare programs to move people out of poverty, and insisted on their complete overhaul. They continued the job, begun in the 1970s, of convincing the public that it was individuals who failed under the current system to move themselves into the mainstream economy and to adopt mainstream values.

Though the EOA and PRWORA differed fundamentally in their approaches to poverty and welfare, editorials on both sides of the debates over both policies identified the problem, the responsible parties, and the potential solutions in strikingly similar ways. By conceiving the problem of poverty as individual in nature — that is, as a result of the individual's deficiency in training, education, values, or work ethic as opposed to having a structural cause — these

editorials primed the public to support policies that reinforced this belief, even if only implicitly. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 aimed not to address the institutional forces like racism that President Johnson recognized, but rather to better prepare the individual to overcome these barriers through education.

Because this approach — grounded as it was in an economic milieu that no longer existed — did not result in fewer poor, the perception of the poor as lacking a work ethic thrived and grew over the intervening decades. By the time of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, editorials needed only to reinforce the sentiment that had been growing among the public. It came to be believed that the welfare system that was meant to solve the problem of poverty had only worsened it by stifling the ability of the poor to take responsibility for themselves by voluntarily entering the low wage workforce.

While the public's opinion on issues of poverty and welfare are not solely the result of newspaper editorials, nor is the passing of any legislation solely the result of popular sentiment or ideology, the way that editorials (and the media in general) frame the problems they address impacts the public's perception of reality and consequently the legislation and legislators that they support. In this instance, increasing editorial support for explanations of poverty that placed accountability on individuals' behavior and that also failed to discuss the macroeconomic forces that influence the poverty rate, led to public and legislative support for policies that eventually dismantled the federal safety net and refashioned the goal of welfare from protection of the poor from economic downturns to mandatory participation in the workforce and acceptance of "shared" mainstream values.

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Appendix One

1964 Editorials, All Sources

Source	Date	Title	Section/Page	Author	Column
New York Times	7/21/1964	Debate Over Poverty	32	Editorial	
New York Times	6/24/1964	War on Poverty	36	Editorial	
Washington Post	4/15/1964	War on Poverty: Headed in the Right Direction	A23	Roscoe Drummond	
Washington Post	3/19/1964	The War on Poverty	A19	Walter Lippman	Today and Tomorrow . . .
Washington Post	3/17/1964	The War on Poverty	A16	Editorial	
Washington Post	2/19/1964	Next Test For Johnson	A17	Joseph Alsop	Matter of Fact. . .
Washington Post	1/27/1964	To the Roots of Poverty	A12	Editorial	
Wall Street Journal	3/20/1964	There Is Always a Bottom Fifth	16;3	William Henry Chamberlin	
Wall Street Journal	3/11/1964	A Philosophy of Poverty	14;1	Editorial	Review and Outlook
Wall Street Journal	4/15/1964	Preserving Poverty	16;4	Harley L. Lutz	
Wall Street Journal	4/3/1964	Anti-Poverty Package	10;4	Joseph Sullivan	
Wall Street Journal	7/28/1964	Too Big A Target	12;1	Editorial	Review and Outlook
Wall Street Journal	3/17/1964	New War, Old Weapons	16;1	Editorial	Review and Outlook
Wall Street Journal	8/11/1964	Individual's Role in Poverty Fight	14;1	William Henry Chamberlin	
Wall Street Journal	3/26/1964	Poverty Boom	14;3	Vermont Royster	Thinking Things Over
Wall Street Journal	2/4/1964	Back to Bryan	16;3	Vermont Royster	Thinking Things Over
Wall Street Journal	8/27/1964	A New Day of Doles	12;1	Editorial	Review and Outlook

Appendix Two

1996 Editorials, All Sources

Source	Date	Title	Section/Page	Author	Column
New York Times	8/25/1996	The 'Nonworking Class'	4, 12,	Editorial Desk	
New York Times	8/24/1996	Welfare's Drug Connection	1, 23	Joseph Califano, Jr.	
New York Times	8/5/1996	Welfare Hysteria	A, 17	Bob Herbert	In America
New York Times	8/2/1996	Throw Them Out	A, 27	Bob Herbert	In America
New York Times	8/1/1996	A Sad Day for Poor Children	A, 26	Editorial Desk	
New York Times	7/25/1996	Mr. Clinton's Duty on Welfare	A, 22	Editorial Desk	
New York Times	7/25/1996	Welfare as We Know It	A, 23	Joseph I. Lieberman	
New York Times	7/22/1996	Welfare Reform in Name Only	A, 19	David T. Ellwood	
New York Times	7/22/1996	The Mouths of Babes	A, 19	Bob Herbert	In America
New York Times	6/1/1996	Who Stands for Children?	1, 18	Editorial Desk	
New York Times	5/28/1996	Wisconsin Shuffle	A, 17	Paul Offner	
New York Times	5/7/1996	Wisconsin's Welfare Boomerang	A, 23	Harriet Brown	
New York Times	5/3/1996	Wisconsin's Bold, Risky Welfare Plan	A, 30	Editorial Desk	
New York Times	2/23/1996	Wanted: Jobs of Last Resort	A, 31	Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk	
New York Times	2/9/1996	The States Won't Be Cruel	A, 29	William Weld	
New York Times	2/2/1996	The Republican Welfare Trap	4, 12	Editorial Desk	
Washington Post	8/29/1996	Whom Do You Trust?	A22	Editorial	
Washington Post	8/23/1996	It Won't Wash, Mr. President	A20	Editorial	
Washington Post	8/19/1996	Where Welfare Recipients Can Find Work	A15	William Raspberry	
Washington Post	8/18/1996	A Welfare Test	C07	William J. Bennet	

Washington Post	8/8/1996	Worse Than Welfare As We Know It?	A31	William Raspberry	
Washington Post	8/5/1996	In The Wake of a Bogus Bill	A19	E.J. Dionne, Jr.	
Washington Post	8/4/1996	When Principle Is At Issue	C07	Daniel P. Moynihan	
Washington Post	8/1/1996	The Welfare Decision	A22	Editorial	
Washington Post	8/1/1996	The Unkindest Cut of All	A02	Mary McGrory	
Washington Post	7/31/1996	For Better Or Worse?	A27	Robert J. Samuelson	
Washington Post	7/27/1996	Trashed by the Welfare Bill	A23	Colbert I. King	
Washington Post	7/26/1996	For the Record	A26	Editorial	
Washington Post	7/26/1996	A Million More Poor Children	A27	Isabel Sawhill, Sheila Zedlewski	
Washington Post	7/25/1996	A Children's Veto	A28	Editorial	
Washington Post	7/25/1996	Unlearned Lessons About Welfare	A29	Paul Offner	
Washington Post	7/23/1996	The Right Vote on the Welfare Bill	A16	Editorial	
Washington Post	7/23/1996	Clinton's Choice	A17	E.J. Dionne, Jr.	
Washington Post	7/21/1996	At Least Save Food Stamps	C06	Editorial	
Washington Post	7/18/1996	A Bad Welfare Bill	A26	Editorial	
Washington Post	7/15/1996	Welfare Reform, Wisconsin Style	A19	William Raspberry	
Washington Post	7/9/1996	Adopt the Wisconsin Plan	A15	Mickey Kaus	
Washington Post	7/4/1996	'Wisconsin Works': Breaking a Covenant	A29	Rembert G. Weakland	
Washington Post	6/23/1996	Welfare Squeeze	C06	Editorial	
Washington Post	6/9/1996	Welfare Gymnastics	C06	Editorial	
Washington Post	6/4/1996	Minding the Children	A02	Mary McGrory	
Washington Post	5/21/1996	The Welfare Trap	A18	Editorial	
Washington Post	2/10/1996	Maryland's Welfare Reform	A22	Editorial	
Washington Post	2/6/1996	Let's Talk Welfare	A15	James K. Glassman	

Washington Post	2/4/1996	Welfare: 'This Fight Is Not Over'	C07	E. Clay Shaw, Jr.	
Washington Post	2/3/1996	Mr. Clinton's Welfare Moves	A18	Editorial	
Washington Post	1/17/1996	Welfare Leadership	A16	Editorial	
Washington Post	1/11/1996	Close Call	A23	Daniel P. Moynihan	
Wall Street Journal	8/9/1996	Uncle Sam Is A Poor Stepfather	A, 10	Robert C. Waterbury	
Wall Street Journal	8/1/1996	It's Over	A, 14	Editorial	Review and Outlook
Wall Street Journal	8/1/1996	Mr. Clinton Keeps His Welfare Promise	A, 14	Will Marshall	
Wall Street Journal	7/29/1996	The Welfare State is Being Altered, Not Scrapped	A, 13	George Melloan	Global View
Wall Street Journal	7/2/1996	White House to Welfare Reformers: Drop Dead	A, 14	Mark Neilsen	
Wall Street Journal	2/28/1996	Welfare: An Albatross for Young Mothers	A, 14	Douglas Besharov	

Vita

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