



## Welfare Reform Ten Years Later

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I am not here to give a policy dissertation. One of the advantages of being a C student is that a lot of complexity doesn't confuse you. We just dismiss it as irrelevant and make our decisions accordingly. For instance, when an 18-wheeler got stuck under a bridge, scores of engineers came out and tried to think up ingenious ways to jack up the bridge and free the truck. Then a 12-year-old boy asked his father, "Why not just let the air out of the tires?" My perspective is that of the 12-year-old when people on the left and right argue about what are the most adroit ways of getting the 18-wheeler unstuck. I say, just let the air out of the tires. That is the point of view that I am going to bring to this talk this evening. How do we get unstuck from where we are and move in the right direction.

If we are to find true and long-lasting remedies, we need to get beyond the existing paradigms of both the Left and the Right. As Bill Bennett said, the Left looks at poor people and sees a sea of victims. The Right looks at poor people and sees a sea of aliens. We must go beyond the bipolar debate. There is an old African proverb that says when the elephants fight, the grass always loses.

Conservatives are great about talking what they are against, but not what they are for. Our Achilles heel is that too many on our side want to fall back on economic and ideological theories and not talk about concrete measures to confront problems. It is important to understand the cultural sources of our problems. And those cultural sources are moral and spiritual. Grassroots leaders go to the core of the problem—they don't talk about "economic disincentives," they talk about a character crisis.

For some welfare recipients, poverty is a result of the bad choices they made and the chances they took. For them, there are issues of character and values that must be dealt with first—and that is what Curtis Watkins of East Capitol Center for Change, Rachel Morrison of EFFORTS, and Pastor Shirley Holloway of House of Help are about.

As Samuel Adams wrote in a letter to James Warren, "*A general dissolution of principles and manners will more surely overthrow the liberties of America than the whole force of the common enemy. While the people are virtuous they cannot be subdued; but when they lose their virtue they will be ready to surrender their liberties to the first external or internal invader...If virtue and knowledge are diffused among the people, they will never be enslaved.*"

The limitation of welfare reform is that it relies on the manipulation of material incentives. It will not ultimately solve the problem. It assumes that people make a rational calculation of the costs and benefits, and that if you change the incentives a bit, you would change some people.

Liberals want to increase services to inspire people to get off welfare. Conservatives want to cut to inspire. But these systems of sticks and carrots are not sufficient to transform people's lives. As James Q. Wilson said, if behavior does not change when the incentives are changed, then something else is in play. That something else is character.

Even conservatives must realize that materialism is not of itself sufficient to transform people's lives. Money and color have not been enough to save thousands of people from despair, including sons and daughters of some of the most prominent people in the country.

We can't get to the problem of poverty unless we get to the moral and spiritual aspects. Some of this was done in Wisconsin. Our late good friend Deacon Bill Lock had a subcontract in the W-2 program to provide work preparation for some people getting off welfare. But in addition to work skills, Deacon Lock gave them character coaching.

One of the biggest challenges to real progress against poverty is elitism. Conservatives pay lip service to the institutions of Civil Society—they say they support faith-based and community organizations. But their impulse to rely on these institutions runs head on into the deeper impulse to put your faith in professionals. However, we know that credentialization does not equal qualification.

We need to cast off the shackles of elitism and the blinders of materialism. If we want to make changes, we need to apply the principles of the market economy.

Talking about increasing the work hours, or not allowing babysitting as work is simply tinkering. And tinkering in the margins will only bring about marginal changes. It will not bring about revolutionary changes that are needed to solve the problems of today's society. We at the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise have achieved revolutionary change—such as reducing gang incidents from 113 to 0 at Dallas' Madison High School—and increasing attendance 93% because the kids were no longer afraid to go to school. That is revolutionary change. The approach of our grassroots leaders there like Omar Jahwar is a cultural approach. They confront the kids at the level of their beliefs and values. The change is not arithmetic—it is geometric.

We will only find those revolutionary changes by supporting these community antibodies. We must empower the people who can inspire people to change. They help young people to understand that change is possible by being witnesses. People must see someone who has come through the same things that they have and are living proof. There are people in this room that have faced some of the worst challenges anyone could face. It was not a promise of a job that helped them overcome these challenges, it was something else. People like Curtis Watkins, Rachel Morrison, Shirley Holloway, and my other grassroots leaders here should be at the centerpiece of policy. Conferences and journals should be asking them in detail, "How do you do what you do?"

We have demonstrated at the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise that Americans are hungry for real remedies that are outside this bitter dispute between the left and the right. As Michael Novak pointed out, the political party that understands and respects and supports the whole mediating structures phenomena will dominate politics well into the future. But the mediating structures approach cannot be used to advance a political or ideological position, or it will be tainted. That is why we believe it is important to keep our work at the Center well above and beyond politics--because it would pollute it.

The true character of America will be measured by what we do for the least among us. As the Gospel says, go out among the broken and damaged to find healing.

We should elevate these leaders as the experts and support them generously. They should become the guides of the nation's long overdue efforts to promote self-sufficiency and strong families. To be sure, as we look to those who have worked with and healed the least among us, we will find a pathway for solutions to the broken marriages and shattered lives of those who live in America's gilded ghettos as well.

By funding conservative principles and working with people of faith to produce transformed people and communities, conservatives can demonstrate a culture that is worth maintaining and resurrecting.

Scholars should use their skills to document the role of grassroots leaders and help them articulate what they do in ways policymakers can accept and the public can understand. "Experts" need to suborn their own egos and understand they know less than the people they serve. They must learn to be on tap and not on top. Conservatives should go out and find people who exemplify social theories—the literature should be full of personal testimonies and accounts of people who have transformed their lives. And no one should be afraid about talking about God and the power of faith in people's lives.