

Local Guest Commentary

Welfare bill trades in New Deal for raw deal

By WILLIAM KASHATUS

Franklin Delano Roosevelt believed that the moral character of any society can be measured by the way it treats its poorest and most vulnerable citizens, especially children. That is why he would be appalled by the recent overhaul of the welfare system and the willingness of our political leaders to relegate so many poorly housed, poorly fed, and poorly educated children to the role of outcasts in an affluent society.

Roosevelt's New Deal profoundly changed the lives of the nation's poor children by establishing the principle of



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government responsibility for their parents, the immediate beneficiaries of federally-subsidized housing, minimum-wage laws, and work relief programs.

While these reforms initiated the concept of the welfare state, they also ensured a better quality of life for future generations. By the late 1930s, Roosevelt's commitment to social justice was so strong that he was hailed as the "ultimate protector of America's children."

Sixty years later, Congress and the President have joined together to dismantle that noble legacy.

Recent reports released by the Children's Defense Fund and the National Low Income Housing coalition indicate that the quality of life is becoming measurably worse for the nation's children, not better. Among the findings are:

■ **Increasing child abuse.** In 1993, there were 2.9 million cases of neglect and abuse, compared with 1.7 million in 1984.

■ **Inadequate health insurance.** About 10 million children had no health insurance in 1994, up from 9.6 million in 1993 and 8.7 million in 1992.

■ **Higher infant mortality.** Nearly 35,000 babies died before their first birthday in 1992, a rate of 8.5 per 1,000. This compares with rates of 9 in Cuba, 12 in Malaysia and 15 in Sri Lan-

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ka, some of the poorest countries in the world.

■ **Increasing poverty.** In 1993, 15.7 million children or 23 percent of all children were poor, up from 9.7 million or 14 percent of all children in 1969.

These statistics indicate that the already existing child-welfare programs have failed to keep the nation's children from suffering the ill effects of poverty.

How can the new bill “do better by children,” as President Clinton predicts, when it abolishes Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the main component of child-welfare?

How will the new system allow single mothers to teach their children the “basic values of work, responsibility, and family” when the government refuses to create the additional jobs needed to get them off welfare?

Instead, Mr. Clinton and Congress are gambling that the states can do better with federal block grants and more flexible spending. Chances are that they won't. Thirty-three states already have eligibility standards higher than those established by the federal government. Nor have many states demonstrated a better record for creating jobs.

There is no question that the welfare system needs to be reformed.

Personal responsibility, a sense of pride, and a much stronger work ethic must take priority among those poor who are physically able to support themselves and their families. Those who can, should go to work. After all, welfare was never intended to be a “self-perpetuating way of life” as much as a “second chance” for those who had fallen on hard times. But there are important exceptions that the new legislation ignores.

What about the indigent poor — the terminally — or physically-disabled —

those who simply can't work?

The new bill's requirement that the head of a family receiving welfare assistance must work within two years, and sets a five-year lifetime limit on assistance ignores their needs. Even continuing health care is based on obtaining a job. Under these conditions, an indigent mother and her children will become homeless, hungry, ill, or worse.

What about the teenager who becomes pregnant as a result of statutory rape? Too often these adolescents — and, in some cases, pre-adolescents — have no safe place to go because they have been victimized by their mother's boyfriend.

The new legislation, which provides government support only for those teen mothers who live at home, doesn't address this scenario either.

For the worse, the 60-year-old New Deal system established by Franklin Roosevelt to protect poor mothers and their children is now gone. In its place is a callous welfare system that will only make children pay for the misfortune, indigence, or irresponsibility of their parents. As those children get older, their bitterness will not be without consequences for us all.

We will witness it in even higher crime rates, drug abuse and poverty than we experience today.

Sadly, Mr. Clinton, by signing such a radical welfare bill, has relinquished a noble legacy that once made the president the “ultimate protector of America's children.”

His vow to “end welfare as we know it,” will not “do better” by our youth. It will only come back to haunt us.

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