

# Reagan, Food Programs, and Budget Cuts: The Forces that Drove the Changes

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## *Introduction*

Research has established the importance of the "human aspect" in economic productivity. Well-fed individuals produce more because they tend to be healthier and happier and food assistance can be seen as an investment that enhances the stock of human capital.<sup>1</sup> While nutritional problems in our country are far less severe than in most of the world, they still influence into our productivity. The U.S. investment in welfare is substantial. Almost half the aggregate income of the bottom fifth of the population was derived from social welfare benefits in the 1980's.<sup>2</sup>

This is a study of the effect of Ronald Reagan's economic policies for the poor of America. Reagan changed the shape of our country when he embraced the fairly new theory of supply-side economics.<sup>3</sup> The impact of the policy stemming from this endorsement made American society an hourglass: the wealthy class grew dramatically, the poverty class experienced its greatest increase since the Great Depression, and the middle class shrunk dramatically. As well as tax cuts, Reagan also made budget cuts to even out the two halves of the economy. Welfare programs had only comprised a tenth of the national budget but suffered a third of the budget cuts that were made, including a reduction in funds in programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, school nutritional programs, low-income energy and low-income housing, and unemployment benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Senauer, "The Current Status of Food and Nutrition Policy and the Food Programs." American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Vol. 64, No. 5 (Dec, 1982): 1009-1016

<sup>2</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, The New Class War, 15

<sup>3</sup> Supply-side economics: tax cuts for all to try to stimulate growth



The "welfare consensus" of America also changed. What were the forces that drove these changes? What was the national attitude towards welfare in the seventies versus the eighties? Why did Reagan target these programs for his budget cuts, instead of areas like defense spending or public works? I also would like to discover why American society accepted these changes and allowed them to progress into the twenty-first century. Reagan's ideology, plainly seen in his speeches, included the idea of a greater need for an "American work ethic," which would reduce the need for welfare. His view on welfare and the recipients of the program greatly influenced the public opinion on this matter.

This study examines the cuts to food programs during Reagan's two terms in office. By analyzing the federal reduction of food programs during the two Reagan presidential terms, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the view of welfare in the pre- and post- Reagan years. The sixties was a time of drastic change, with many Americans pushing for equality and a better society. The presidency started looking at poverty differently in the late seventies, and I would like to discover what forces drove the change in perspective towards the impoverished. It is hard to believe that the perspective on social welfare changed so dramatically in such a short period of time. I would also like to highlight why those changes have remained in place. The poor have been dramatically affected since the budget cuts of twenty years ago and are still enduring the results of those changes. This study will contribute to the larger study on welfare that has played out through this century. It is important to know how the



government's programs affect the poor, for they are a part of our society and their achievements can determine how successful our country really is.

Food programs are an essential part of welfare. There are four main elements of food and nutrition policy: retail food prices, food safety and quality, nutrition education and research, and the federal food assistance programs. I will analyze the last segment-federal food assistance programs. They include Food Stamps and child nutrition programs. Reagan, in his OBRA<sup>4</sup> budget cuts, decided to make dramatic cuts on welfare programs, heavily affecting the food nutrition programs. The "deserving line" for food assistance was raised, disqualifying many recipients from the program on the grounds that they were not truly needy. This greatly affected those in poverty, especially those who were dropped from the program.

### *Past work*

The public's view on welfare had changed from the sixties to the eighties. As Gareth Davies points out, the people of 1964 had faith in government and were optimistic about the nation's future. The "Great Society"<sup>5</sup> was accepted into the American mindset.<sup>6</sup> By the time Reagan came into office, the mood of people had changed dramatically: the Great Society was seen as a failure, the postwar boom had halted, confidence in government had plummeted, and 3/5 of people believed we were spending too much on welfare.

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<sup>4</sup> OBRA stands for Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, passed in 1981. Its main purpose was to balance the budget while cutting taxes to keep our country in the economically positive.

<sup>5</sup> The Great Society was Lyndon B. Johnson's vision for a "War on Poverty" to diminish the poverty line and bring our country together by increasing welfare programs and decreasing unemployment.

<sup>6</sup> Gareth Davies, "The Welfare State," The Reagan Presidency. Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 210

Alex Waddan argues the Right succeeded in changing the American value system. During the eighties there was a shift from liberals to conservatives helping the underprivileged. The problem of the poor was seen as dependency on welfare programs rather than poverty itself. It was thought that dependency on programs would decrease people's work effort because the income source was already supplemented. The Right verbally attacked the welfare state by saying that constant increase in government spending programs was economically self-defeating. They also believed that recipients lost their dignity by accepting hand-outs.<sup>7</sup> Joel Handler supports this claim and believes that welfare recipients continued to endure segregation and to be stigmatized as the welfare poor.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars have discussed Reagan's ideology and how it affected the mood of the American people toward welfare. Larry Berman captures the essence of Reagan's ideology and the effects it had on policy-making. He defines an ideological presidency - it must have ideas, implementation, and effects to be fully ideological. In Berman's view, Reagan meets all three criteria and is an exemplar of effective leadership in policy-making.<sup>9</sup> Alice O'Connor shows how Reagan put words into the nations' mouth. "My friends, some years ago, the federal government declared war on poverty, and poverty won." The choice phrases he used in his speeches were designed to put poverty experts on the defensive to justify the programs that existed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Waddan, The Politics of Social Welfare: The Collapse of the Centre and the Rise of the Right (Brookfield: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1997), 133- 137

<sup>8</sup> Joel F. Handler, The Poverty of Welfare Reform (Chelsea: Yale University, 1995), 61

<sup>9</sup> Larry Berman, Looking Back on the Reagan Presidency (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 123, 124-126, 148

<sup>10</sup> Alice O'Connor, Poverty Knowledge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 243



Scholars have shown the income redistribution that occurred in the 1980's was due to tax and budget cuts. Alex Waddan demonstrates that the poverty rate decreased between 1960 and 1980 while Reagan made statements that poverty had actually increased during those years. It was only in 1980 that the rates started climbing again.<sup>11</sup> O'Connor also emphasizes the White House staff's point of view on income redistribution. OMB<sup>12</sup> director David Stockman insisted on focusing on supplementary income like food stamps and child lunches instead of concentrating on the number of people needing welfare. He believed that in-kind programs like these could cut official poverty rates in half.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars look at the OBRA cuts themselves before they look at any of their effects. Kent Weaver sees the cuts as straightforward, but had a significant change on program spending and character of the programs.<sup>14</sup> Gareth Davies sees the problem as more complicated as it was coupled with a tax cut. He believes the spending cuts were made "in response to short-term economic exigencies." Davies also viewed Reagan to be "motivated more by a desire to save money wherever political resistance was weakest than by an integrated version for welfare reform."<sup>15</sup>

The overall question scholars pose when looking at Reagan's economic policies is: "Was Reagan's term really a revolution?" Larry Berman emphasizes that early studies claim it was definitely a revolution by attacking America's stagflation. Later studies

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<sup>11</sup> Waddan, 135

<sup>12</sup> OMB stands for Office of Management and Budget; in Reagan's era, David Stockman was the head of this office.

<sup>13</sup> O'Connor, 246

<sup>14</sup> Kent Weaver, Ending Welfare as We Know It (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000), 68

<sup>15</sup> Davies, 211



undermine this view because most of the policies had roots in the Carter years. He also looks at the economic impact: "personal savings rates [were] lower and consumption higher, and neither business investment nor productivity growth [rose]." <sup>16</sup> Alice O'Connor leaves it up to her readers to determine if it was a revolution, by leaving the word "revolution" in quotes and outlining the changes made in the system.<sup>17</sup> Alex Waddan, along the same lines, believes talk of the Reagan presidency in revolution terms is misleading. He agrees with early scholars that there were a series of landmark shifts, but prefers to focus on the "evolution of the general political environment which so inhabited liberal Democrats in the 1980s." Reagan spoke in more ideological terms than in specifics and succeeded in redirecting the American political culture back to some political "frontierism," scoring legislative successes. Waddan's point is that it would do no good to only look at Reagan's scorecard in legislature, but to also look at the impact of Reaganism, which was far-reaching.<sup>18</sup> Gareth Davies prefers to look at the failures of Reagan's welfare reform to emphasize the ineffectiveness of his proposals. If no initiatives achieved their objective, where is the "revolution"? Reagan's "New Federalism" proposal in '82 came to nothing; the efforts to cut back on Social Security, disability benefits, and child nutrition programs encountered a backlash; he did not try to convert categorical programs into block grants, Reagan's urge to encourage voluntary giving went nowhere; the AFDC was not transformed as he desired; and the cuts implemented to OBRA were eventually reversed. Davies does support, though, that there was at least a revolutionary moment during first 6 months of the budget cuts. "The ending

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<sup>16</sup> Berman, 122-123

<sup>17</sup> O'Connor, 242

<sup>18</sup> Waddan, 132

of welfare" did not happen with Ronald Reagan, and he didn't make it inevitable, but he did make it possible.<sup>19</sup>

### *Programs*

The Food Stamp program has been in effect for the last half of the twentieth century. It began in 1965 as a supplement to farm income. Its original goals were "nutritional improvement and expansion of agricultural commodity demand."<sup>20</sup> Food stamps are given to low-income families and individuals to help them buy food. They are federally funded and state administered in county welfare departments.

The program has grown phenomenally as word has gotten out and the population has increased. It began with only half a million recipients costing the government only \$2.5 million in aid but by 1980 had skyrocketed to 21.1 million people drawing \$8.6 billion from the government a year.<sup>21</sup> In 1981, it had become the nation's second largest income maintenance program in participants and costs, serving over 21 million people at \$11 billion a year. According to Michael Katz, it is no wonder that one of Reagan's first goals in the war on welfare was to restrict the food stamps to the officially poor.<sup>22</sup> Carleson's catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance claims that Fiscal Year 1980 only saw \$6,481 million spent on food stamps. The estimate by Robert Carleson for the costs of food stamps was that the program that cost \$11,084 million in '81 was due to increase to \$14,289 million by '83.<sup>23</sup> That is quite a jump from what was spent in 1980. Through

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<sup>19</sup> Davies, 211

<sup>20</sup> Senauer, p. 1012

<sup>21</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *The Reagan Revolution*, p.130

<sup>22</sup> Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, p. 266

<sup>23</sup> Issue Paper: "Department of Agriculture, Food Stamps", Folder "Welfare Reform (3)," box OA 9590, Robert Carleson Files, Ronald Reagan Library, p. 2



these estimations, it was somewhere decided that this program needed to be cut back in Fiscal Year '82 and thus these estimations never came true.

The Nixon and Carter administrations established the food stamp program as it existed at the beginning of Reagan's term. It was part of a shift from income programs towards in-kind programs. The program had uniform national standards for eligibility and benefits. The coverage was universal for those that met the criteria and was not restrictive to certain categories of poor. In the seventies, food stamps became the major assistance program available to the working poor. With the program came strong work incentives and requirements to work. Cost of living adjustments were automatic, calculated on an annual basis. The federal administration had ultimate control over the program with state and county welfare offices serving as the basic administrative units.<sup>24</sup>

Receiving food stamps was not treated as an honorable process. As described in Milwaukee County, it was embarrassing for some people to ask for food stamps, so they went without. Problems encountered included "embarrassing treatment from clerks or other customers in the store."<sup>25</sup> Derogatory names abounded, such as "welfare queens" and "welfare cheats." This helped Reagan in his efforts to cut the program.

The food program that came in second to food stamps was the National School Lunch Program. President Reagan believed fully in this program and kept the declaration of National School Lunch Week as the third week in October. The program, established in 1946, was established to provide nutritious, low-cost lunches to students. Reagan believed that this program above all displayed the nation's commitment to the health of

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<sup>24</sup> Senauer, p. 1012

<sup>25</sup> Joel F. Handler and Ellen Jane Hollingsworth, *The Deserving Poor: A Study of Welfare Administration*. (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971), 185



youth.<sup>26</sup> In 1987, it appeared that lunch counts were reduced by 3 million, as seen in Reagan's speeches of 1986 and 1987, while the population continued to rise.<sup>27</sup>

According to the Reagan administration, in-kind benefits, such as food stamps and school lunches, increased in use since 1965, making them more important than cash. In 1965, 1.4% of the budget (or \$900 million a year) was devoted to in-kind benefits. By 1982, 13.5% of the budget (or \$94.2 billion) was spent on these programs.<sup>28</sup> For recipients, unrestricted cash transfers are preferred because it maximizes their utility. For their donors, utility is maximized with in-kind transfers when it relates to use of a particular good by the recipient, as is seen with Food Stamps. For this reason, food stamps have become the preferred method over cash grants in this system.<sup>29</sup> The National School Lunch Program has been built on food surpluses but has tried to make the shift to cash as well. In 1973, the country ran out of surpluses, making the school lunch program desperate for cash; it has tried to "cash out" ever since.<sup>30</sup>

The poverty line seemed to have decreased with growth in funding of public programs. In 1975, there were 25,877 people (or 12.3% of the population) that made less than \$5,500 (for a family of four), which was the poverty line. In 1979, there were 25,179 people (or 11.6% of the population) that made less than \$7,450 a year.<sup>31</sup> This shows that although inflation had taken off quickly in four years, the numbers of people that were in

<sup>26</sup> Proclamation 5546- National School Lunch Week, 1986. October 8, 1986, by President Reagan [www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1986/100886k.htm](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1986/100886k.htm)

<sup>27</sup> Proclamation 5725- National School Lunch Week, 1987. October 8, 1987 by President Reagan [www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1987/100887k.htm](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1987/100887k.htm)

<sup>28</sup> "In-Kind Benefits," Folder "Welfare Reform (3)," box OA 9590, Robert Carleson Files, Ronald Reagan Library

<sup>29</sup> Senauer, p. 1014

<sup>30</sup> Stephen J. Hiemstra, "Food Program Policy Initiatives in an Era of Farm Surpluses," American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Vol. 67, No. 2 (May, 1985), p. 346

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, Table D



poverty seemed to be declining. In 1981 it was determined to cut back on the programs that helped this decline.

### *Reagan's contributions to the cuts*

Reagan came into office with high hopes for the future. He had watched the country's economy deflate throughout the four years of Carter's term. Once in office, he set out with ambitious goals to change the system of spending in America. His main focus was to "force down the size of the domestic welfare state to the point where it could be adequately funded with the revenues available after the tax cut."<sup>32</sup> He had three visions for reform, or as some has called, his "War on Poverty." First, he believed the government spending had created dependency on social programs by those in the lowest social brackets. Second, he upheld the long-existing American belief in volunteerism. And thirdly, he put faith in a "New Federalism," a system that would have the states manage the social programs instead of the federal government.

Firstly, Ronald Reagan set out to put an end to dependency in the social system. He, as well as many other politicians, believed that one's hard earned money should go towards oneself, not to support someone else that does not want to work for oneself. He "went on the offensive" against a theory he had been developing for twenty years, that "government spending and economic mismanagement" were to blame for poverty.<sup>33</sup> The result of professionals' research, in Reagan's eyes, "has been a welfare system that's very

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<sup>32</sup> Davies, 216

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 217



good at keeping people poor.”<sup>34</sup> As Reagan said, “It’s time for us to find out if of the most dynamic and constructive forces known to man- free enterprise and the profit motive- can be brought to play where government bureaucracy and social programs have failed.”<sup>35</sup>

Public opinion on welfare varied greatly. Some believed that only with the federal government’s help could the poor get off their feet and be productive again. Others believed it was a waste of federal money to continue to give money to the poor when they personally did not see results. The public also held the perception that there were high error rates in the state administration of the programs.<sup>36</sup> Our cultural history plays a large role in the way we perceive giving to the poor. According to Benjamin Senauer, there are two main facets of American heritage that clash when public assistance is measured. “Christian charity supports helping those less fortunate, whereas the Protestant work ethic considers that those unwilling to work hard should suffer the consequences.” Because of this conflict, our society is more willing to help groups such as the elderly who are not expected to work.<sup>37</sup> The government is assumed to ultimately take on the responsibility for the well-being of its citizens, which dates back to Franklin Roosevelt.

Conflicts over responsibility continue, and can be seen in the two political parties. The liberals viewed food stamp recipients as the economy’s “unfortunate victims who

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<sup>34</sup> Remarks and a Panel Discussion with Community Leaders on Welfare Reform (Feb 11, 1987), Ronald Reagan Library, <http://www.reagan.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1987/021187a.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Davies, 217

<sup>36</sup> B.B. Kymlicka and Jean V. Matthews, *The Reagan Revolution?* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988), 159

<sup>37</sup> Senauer, p. 1012



have been shortchanged by a society which owes them fuller compensation." The conservatives believed that the participants were "freeloaders on the American economy," ultimately responsible for their own employment and sustenance.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, Reagan had a strong faith in volunteerism. He had a vision of Americans helping out fellow citizens and working side by side. He felt that the government should not be involved on the level it had been raised up to and more power should be given back to the people- they should have the right to help out a fellow out of the kindness of their hearts, not because it was automatically taken out of their paychecks. Reagan believed that government spending and economic mismanagement were responsible for poverty. Instead, he had a strong belief in volunteerism, backed by religious conservatives. He spoke on this topic many times. In Reagan's speech for National Care and Share Day in 1983, he stated that the unique American tradition of voluntarism was as old as the nation itself.<sup>39</sup> The next year for the same day, he said, "The spirit of neighbor helping neighbor flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our Nation. We are proud of our strong and uniquely American tradition of voluntarism. Compassion, vision, and a fundamental sense of decency are the hallmarks of our national character and are reflected in the charitable works of our citizens."<sup>40</sup> On January 15, 1983, he told the New York Partnership, Inc:

We passed our reforms in Washington but change must begin at the grass roots, on the streets where you live. And that's why on September 24, I announced that we were launching a nationwide effort to encourage

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<sup>38</sup> Senauer, p. 1012, quoting from Peter Timmer

<sup>39</sup> "Proclamation 5139- National Care and Share Day," December 19, 1983 by Ronald Reagan, [www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1983/121983b.htm](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1983/121983b.htm)

<sup>40</sup> "Proclamation 5285- National Care and Share Day, 1984," December 3, 1984, by Ronald Reagan, [www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1984/120384a.htm](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1984/120384a.htm)

citizens to join with us in finding where need exists and then to organize volunteer programs to meet those needs. The American people understand the logic of our approach. A recent Roper poll found a large majority believe that Government does not spend tax money for human services as effectively as a leading private organization like the United Way.<sup>41</sup>

Critics of the eighties' welfare reform judged the views of the administration.

Michael Katz brings a this train of thought forward, stating that assumptions about varied human nature in different classes and volunteerism was presumed to have driven much of the war on welfare. According to Francis Piven, it was an "archaic idea" still held by Reagan that "people in different social classes have different human natures and thus different motivations." The affluent exert themselves in response to rewards (lower taxes) while working people only respond to punishment.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the administration justified this thinking by cutting both taxes and welfare programs.<sup>43</sup>

Volunteerism was always more of a desired goal than a reality. It never met most of the needs of dependent Americans, thus making public assistance necessary. Volunteer corporations have become even more dependent on public funding because the government sector made more contracts with the private sector. These agencies were left with less funding to provide for a greater number of people needing assistance due to termination of welfare benefits.<sup>44</sup>

Lastly, Reagan hoped to further decrease the power of the government and return that power to the states. This would be done in his "New Federalism," a plan to give the social programs to the states to manage in return for the control of Medicare. The

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<sup>41</sup> Katz, p.280

<sup>42</sup> Piven, *The New Class War*, p. 39

<sup>43</sup> Katz, p. 280

<sup>44</sup> Katz, p.280



programs would still be funded by the federal government, but would be given over in the form of block grants instead of individualized grants.

According to Gareth Davies, Reagan's ideological approach to welfare was based on several assumptions. First, the federal government had a duty to protect the "truly needy." As a young man, Ronald had supported this New Deal<sup>45</sup> view. Secondly, he believed most of the money of the New Deal went to people who did not need or deserve it. As a result, the money that went to these people "damaged its recipients, eroding their family life, work ethic, and self respect." This, in turn, damaged the nation as whole by killing the American spirit of pioneering and voluntary giving. Reagan also believed that spending on poor was unconstitutional, usurping powers of the state and the people. And lastly, poverty could be eliminated if capitalism was liberated.<sup>46</sup> Reagan's conservative war on poverty, according to Davies, was the scapegoat for an economic recovery program.

David Stockman, Reagan's budget director, admits in his Triumph of Politics that Reagan's goal was to make maximum cuts to the welfare program, a goal that was hindered by the American political process. Reagan had to get his proposals passed through Congress and only a few Congressmen supported the dramatic welfare cut plan that sought to bring the programs back to their pre-1970 levels. Others only wanted to modify the programs and still some wanted to restore the lean New Deal welfare state. Despite the criticism of his proposal, Reagan modified little of his plan in the 1983 budget, keeping taxes low and welfare programs reduced with a whole new set of budget

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<sup>45</sup> The New Deal was instituted to provide relief from the Great Depression in the 1930's. Through this program lead by FDR, many new social systems were put in place, including new welfare safety nets.

<sup>46</sup> Davies, 209



cuts. He refused to listen to his advisors, and the administration's political standing deteriorated, leading the changes nowhere.<sup>47</sup>

### *Ideology of Welfare Reform*

Both President Reagan and Congress saw a need for change in social spending. Investigations into the status of poverty began in 1980. The poverty research industry experienced a shift to the right, which affected how findings were used. Instead of reshaping the policy debate, the industry accommodated the desires of the Republican political party.<sup>48</sup> A Task Force was established by the government in response to hunger in 1983. It was their mission to bring forth a "no-holds-barred study" of the extent of America's hunger problem, inviting investigation into the government programs. When he received the report, however, Reagan did not disclose any details of the report to the public in his speech on the subject. Rather, he persuaded American citizens that "God has blessed our country with a rich abundance. By reminding us that in this land of plenty, there can be no excuse for hunger, the Task Force on Food Assistance has presented us with a challenge. We will meet this challenge through public and private resources [volunteering]—and we will do so with intelligence, prudence, and compassion."<sup>49</sup>

A public research group, the Urban Institute, was many times critical of the Reagan administration. It initiated a three-year project in 1981 called Changing

<sup>47</sup> Davies, 215

<sup>48</sup> O'Connor, 251

<sup>49</sup> Statement on Receiving the Report of the President's Task Force on Food Assistance (Jan 10, 84), Ronald Reagan Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1984/11084c.htm>



Domestic Priorities to "examine the shifts in domestic policy occurring under the Reagan administration and the consequences of those shifts,"<sup>50</sup> resulting in the book The Social Contract Revisited. This book is a compilation of many researchers and experts in the field of domestic policy, who many times are opposed on a particular subject. The UI has done this so the reader could obtain a less biased version of the current domestic issues. One such author was Martin Anderson, Reagan's chief domestic policy advisor. He supported the Urban Institute, stating theirs was "the only attempt being made to objectively and comprehensively assess these policies."<sup>51</sup> In fact, other authors of the Urban Institute were critical of his statements as well. Stuart E. Eizenstat believed both Anderson and Reagan were guilty of exaggerating or flat-out lying about social welfare programs.<sup>52</sup>

Many of the UI's figures on poverty were contradictory to the figures the government presented, and some of these figures highlighted the discrimination shown towards the poor. Because these findings did not support Reagan's argument, Reagan contested their results. Dan Thomasson, editor of Scripps-Howard News Service interviewed Reagan about key issues in 1984, bringing up The Urban Institute. He states,

Obviously, a great number of American people have agreed with you that some cuts were necessary. But the Urban Institute cites that the poverty level grew faster in the first 3 years of your Presidency than any other period since the fifties. The Congressional Budget Office in July reported that budget reductions alone -- taking unemployment as an aside -- but the

<sup>50</sup> John L. Palmer and Isabel V. Sawhill, The Social Contract Revisited. (Washington DC: The Urban Institute Press, 1984), xi

<sup>51</sup> Martin Anderson, "The Objectives of the Reagan Administration's Social Welfare Policy," The Social Contract Revisited, 15

<sup>52</sup> Eizenstat, The Social Contract Revisited, 28-29



budget reductions alone had pushed 560,000 people below the poverty line -- 325,000 of them children alone. Mr. President, what further cuts in welfare spending will be necessary in the next Reagan administration? And secondly, how do you answer your opponents who say that you are practicing social Darwinism?

The President. Well, I answer them -- first of all, I challenge the Urban Institute's figures. And I don't think that they can be substantiated at all, because we are spending more money today and helping more people than at any time in our nation's history. With regard to food, the increase in food programs is up 37 percent over what it was. We made cuts in suggested increases. We have reduced -- on the domestic side of the budget -- we have reduced the rate of increase in spending from 17 percent down to 6 percent. But in many of these figures, for example in food stamps, some of the so-called savings in food stamps -- we're, incidentally, giving more food stamps to more people than we've ever done before in history. There are something like, oh, I think somewhere around 3 million more people are getting them than were getting them in 1980.<sup>53</sup>

President Reagan challenged the figures of the Urban Institute because they did not match up to his.

Societal support for the changes varied. Initial support for the cuts in the programs seemed strong, especially from the radical right, but the support apparently soon became soft. Their position on this issue was rethought with the confrontation of the possibility of actually losing the welfare state. The rhetoric of welfare cuts, as is most times, was proved to be preferred over the action itself.<sup>54</sup>

The public was also unsure of what to think about welfare, for the term became derogatory in the eighties. Both parties talked incessantly against the welfare system, its flaws and how it was not working. It seems that they were on board with Reagan during

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with the Representatives of Scripps-Howard News Service (Oct 25, 84), Ronald Reagan Library, <http://www.reagan.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1984/102584c.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Howard Glennerster and James Midgley, The Radical Right and the Welfare State: An International Assessment, 67

this period, but one needs to look at the polls in depth. As an example, in a 1992 poll taken by CBS/ New York Times questioning if more money should be allocated toward welfare, only 23% answered yes. But when the question was rephrased to ask if the government should help the poor, 64% said yes.<sup>55</sup> The polling results vary depending on what word was used. The public is uneasy with the words "welfare" or "relief" but more comfortable with "assistance for the poor." Due to this shift in perspective, the public has generally been more accepting of food stamps than a guaranteed annual income.<sup>56</sup>

Polls suggest the American society can not make up its mind about food programs. Polls taken by NORC-GSS show a shift in acceptance of welfare from the seventies to the eighties. The question asked was "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively... tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on [welfare], too little money, or about the right amount." In February 1974, 22% thought we were spending too little, 32% thought we were spending about right, and 42% thought we were spending too much. By February 1980, only 13% thought we were spending too little, 26% thought were spending about right, and an incredible 57% thought we were spending too much on welfare.

To show people were ambiguous, another poller, ABC/WP, asked the same question a different way: "Please tell me whether you feel spending should be increased, decreased, or left about the same [for the] poor." In February 1981, 49% felt spending should be increased, 33% felt it should be left about the same, while only 15% felt it should be decreased. By 1982, the situation seemed to have gotten worse in the public's

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<sup>55</sup> Zinn, p.612

<sup>56</sup> Robert Y. Shapiro, Kelly D. Patterson, Judith Russell, John T. Young, "Public Assistance," The Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring 1987), 120



eyes: 62% now felt that federal funding for the poor should be increased, 28% felt it should be left the same and only 8% left felt that spending should be decreased.

Yet in another poll by NYT/CBS, it was asked if federal spending on food stamps should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. In March of 1981, 12% wanted an increase, 33% wanted it kept the same, but half of the population (50%) hoped to see federal spending on food stamps decreased.<sup>57</sup> This shows that polls of American opinion can not be taken too seriously, for people change their answers depending on the way a question is asked.

According to O'Connor, a "new consensus" was reached on welfare reform. Although it was officially reached by 1986, it shows an ongoing public concern about welfare and the cuts made to it. In 1970, analytic welfare reform had embraced universalism, rather than a distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. The Reagan years brought a "new consensus" on welfare, which emphasized individual responsibility and heightened the distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. This welfare consensus was shared by both liberals and conservatives and was based on three main assumptions. First, welfare was not effective because it was both unfair to working poor and violated American values of independence, work ethic, and sociability. Prevention of dependency was the key point for conservatives. Secondly, a need was seen to "disaggregate" the "behaviorally dependent" from involuntarily poor families. Thirdly, absent fathers should take full responsibility for their children and

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<sup>57</sup> O'Connor, 236-237

<sup>57</sup> Shapiro, 125



mothers should have to work to support their children. And in all circumstances, welfare should only be transitional and not left open-ended.<sup>58</sup>

Charles Murray was a leading scholar on the subject of welfare in the early eighties and greatly influenced the Reagan administration. His book Losing Ground was seen as the welfare reform bible and was taken very seriously by the administration. He argued that the entire welfare system should be abolished because it is counterproductive and detrimental to the social good. Murray was also a lead scholar on the idea of adding all forms of income to determine if one would be eligible for social programs.<sup>59</sup>

The White House published its own set of ideology terms for welfare in response to the changing atmosphere. "Principles of Responsible Welfare Reform" was a report by Kevin R. Hopkins, Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director, Office of Policy Information in the White House during Reagan's terms. The issue of welfare reform was very emotional and Hopkins wrote this segment to assure Americans that the budget cuts were fair to the groups that were being affected. Hopkins highly believed in the American tenet that earned income belongs individually to the people who earn it. This conflicts with another American belief, helping out people in need. We, as a nation, pay taxes, and the American people should have some say over what those taxes are being spent on. From an administration point of view, it is not their place to take our money when it is our choice to give to those who are needy.<sup>60</sup>

Hopkins brought forward the objections to the welfare cuts. One major objection was the accusation that the administration was helping the rich at the expense of the poor.

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<sup>58</sup> O'Connor, 256-257

<sup>59</sup> Murray, 22, 63

<sup>60</sup> Hopkins, "Principles of Welfare Reform," 3



Another charge is the fear that states would use money from the block grants directed for food programs on bettering another area of the state's programs. There was a prediction that the cuts would lead to massive unrest and crime. He believed if people would revolt because they were taken off of welfare, they should be taken off because they were not deserving of welfare in the first place.<sup>61</sup>

Hopkins did not address other key issues. The Reagan administration promised to keep the social safety net in place. However, it did not promise to keep providing for the growing program. The government blamed the people involved in the programs for the growing numbers because of dependency on the programs and fraud. It never took into account the growing American population in any of its figures. The poverty level had grown and the population had definitely led the precedence. Hopkins continuously compares the numbers of 1981 to the seventies and even the fifties, but never really considers why those numbers could be so different. Further, with a larger population coupled with rising inflation, the amount of tax income should have been a lot greater in 1981 to cover the growth of the program participation. The people involved in the programs were still paying taxes while receiving benefits, paying their share of the tax burden as well. Nevertheless, the figures show that the truly poor were still affected by the cuts.

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<sup>61</sup> Hopkins, "Principles or Welfare Reform," 16



### *Changes in the Programs*

Hopkins in his "Principles of Welfare Reform" laid out the proposed changes in the system during Reagan's terms. The major portion of the reforms for the food programs concerned eligibility and the inclusion of all types of income to determine that eligibility. Another large proposed reform was the shift towards block grants to the states to make the states accountable for the programs, citing the reasons that the states are closer to the recipients and know their people and their needs more. The major way the programs needed to be reformed was in the area of fraud, waste, and abuse. Through these reforms, the government hoped to shrink the programs' spending.

These programs changed in one main way: funding. In-kind programs were cut an estimated \$65.4 billion dollars from 1982 to 1985. A study tracing how these budget cuts affected the individuals involved showed that through these four years, the average family making less than \$10,000 a year suffered reductions in in-kind benefits amounting to \$1,340.<sup>62</sup> In March 1981, the Reagan administration called for \$3.6 billion worth of cuts from the USDA's food and nutrition programs.<sup>63</sup> The budget amounted to \$12.5 billion in 1982 and \$1.8 billion of the budget cuts was in food stamps and \$1.4 billion was in the school lunch program. They reduced the food stamp program by changing eligibility standards, delaying inflation adjustments,<sup>64</sup> and reducing benefits to the working poor.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality*, pp. 205-206

<sup>63</sup> Senauer, 1010

<sup>64</sup> The annual inflation adjustment in the Thrifty Food Plan was postponed until October 1, 1982 when they are normally made in January



The Assistant Secretary to the President, Mary C. Jarratt, testified in the Senate Hearings on Nutrition, FY<sup>65</sup> 1983 what was on the minds of everybody in early 1982. She explains in further detail the goal of the administration in relation to food stamps to target benefits towards those most in need. She admits that nearly 55% of households will lose eligibility under the new guidelines designed to cut out the undeserving. The proposals are outlined in eleven basic steps. First, the benefit reduction rate<sup>66</sup> would increase from 30 to 35% starting July, 1982, saving the administration an estimated \$227 million in 1982 and a further \$978 million in '83. Secondly, the minimum benefit provision<sup>67</sup> will be eliminated, saving \$32 million in '82 and \$138 million in '83. Thirdly, they proposed to repeal the earnings deduction<sup>68</sup>, which allowed the exclusion of up to 18% of income to be deducted from the calculation of welfare to determine benefits. Including all income would reduce the participation, thus saving \$140 million in '82 and \$606 million in '83. The fourth proposal was rounding down calculations of allotments to save \$10 million that year and \$117 the next. Fifth, energy assistance payments were also included in eligibility verification, estimating a save of \$231 million in '83. Sixth, a job search would be required to make sure all participants were complying with work requirements. Next, error rates on the state's level needed to be adjusted to a 3% error rate, with the states taking responsibility for any errors made over that level, saving the federal government \$615 million in '83. Eighth, interaction costs

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<sup>65</sup> FY- Fiscal Year

<sup>66</sup> Benefit reduction rate: how much the benefits would be reduced in the new system

<sup>67</sup> Minimum benefit provision: part of the "safety net theory," that held that these lower classes would still be entitled to a minimum benefit amount instead of being eliminated from the program altogether. In 1982 it was proposed to eliminate this.

<sup>68</sup> Earnings deduction: amount of income that was exempt from being calculated into the equation to determine if someone was eligible for benefits

due to interaction with the 1981 Reconciliation (OBRA) would increase food stamp costs by \$136 million in '82 and \$530 million in '83. Ninth, a federalism plan where the states would receive an allocation for the programs would save \$43.3 million in 1983. Tenth, responsibility for work requirements and job search activities would be turned over to the states as well, trimming government involvement and resulting in a savings of \$65 million in '82 and \$80.3 million in '83. And lastly, the total budget saving request was estimated at \$273 million in 1982 and a whopping \$2,293.6 million in 1983.<sup>69</sup>

It was the government's intention to eliminate fraud and there were many ideas to prevent it. The main goal was to increase the technology of the program administration to stop using inefficient paper trails. The USDA issued new rules requiring photo ID cards to be used when receiving their coupons. Taking it a step further, the state of Michigan began using a new computer system that was highly effective in reducing fraud. The paper cards were replaced with a type of credit card that could not be duplicated. Even back in the eighties they were talking about "intelligent" credit cards that contain their own microprocessor.<sup>70</sup>

Congress played a large role in the process of the welfare cuts. It is this group that decided what would become law and what was too radical to be passed. Reagan blamed this group for not accomplishing his goals. However, in the 97<sup>th</sup> Congress, which was held during these budget cuts, only the House was Democratic, for

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<sup>69</sup> Statement by Mary C. Jarrett, Assistant Secretary Before the House Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations and Nutrition, March 24, 1982, Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations and Nutrition on the Committee of Agriculture, House of Representatives 97<sup>th</sup> Congress, March 24-25, 1982, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, pp. 78-85

<sup>70</sup> Senauer, p. 1012



the Senate was Republican. The House can pass a bill, but unless it is also passed in the Senate, it will go nowhere. The House, which was Democratic, tried to pass many bills to reform welfare that the Senate later rejected, which seems like the opposite of what should have happened.

President Reagan, in an interview about the 1984 election, blamed the unachieved budget cuts on Congress. In Reagan's second year, he proposed \$9 billion in cuts but Congress would only approve him \$1 billion, as explained by the Washington correspondent of the New York Times: "Political concerns about the fairness of Mr. Reagan's programs have forced the Administration to curtail its efforts to make further cutbacks in programs for the poor."<sup>71</sup> Republican Senators in 1982 did not consistently support Reagan in his endeavors to cut welfare. Robert Dole (R-Kansas) stated that "somebody else is going to have to start taking a hit besides welfare recipients."<sup>72</sup> Pete Dominici (R- New Mexico), chair of the budget committee, warned that tax *hikes* were the only answer to the budget problem. House Republican leader Robert Michael (R-Ill), backed by conservatives Trent Lott and Dick Cheney, was "paranoid on the subject of further spending cuts."<sup>73</sup> These cuts were focused on fraud, eligibility, and child nutrition programs.

### *Fraud, Waste, and Abuse*

Fraud, waste, and abuse were a major focus of the government. The limit for receiving welfare was 130% of poverty and many people with income over that limit

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<sup>71</sup> As quoted in Zinn, p. 610

<sup>72</sup> Davies p. 215

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 215

were receiving welfare. The goal was to reduce the participation level back to the pre-1970 level. To reduce this required establishing eligibility, instituting means tests, and detecting fraud.

Fraud in the food stamp program was a sensitive area in the American psyche. "Fraud and misuse of food stamps have become a politically hypersensitive topic, which has the potential for discrediting the whole program." Due to this threat, a set of reforms for the program was aimed at eliminating abuse. The benefits of reduced abuse are better than "just the immediate savings because of the public's moral objection to illegal activity and the need to protect the integrity of the program."<sup>74</sup>

Hopkins addressed incidences of fraud and abuse. He opened his report with what he calls "inaccurate caricatures" of America's public support system. He was referring to the many stories used by both sides of the welfare debate to support their argument, including stories of fraud and also those of the desperately poor.<sup>75</sup> In a Question and Answer session with reporters on February 8, 1982, the reporters bring up that Reagan has claimed the FY '83 budget was "not balanced on the backs of the poor and the needy, but that's what the Democrats are saying already, and they're coming up with lots of stories about people who are suffering because of the budget cuts that are already in place." Reagan responded with, "Yes, and they'll probably try to find horror stories and, incidentally, this is something I think all of you ought to be on guard against."<sup>76</sup> However, Reagan used his own "horror stories" to prove his point.

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<sup>74</sup> Senauer, p. 1011

<sup>75</sup> Hopkins, "Principles," 1

<sup>76</sup> Remarks and a Q&A Session w/ Reporters at Fiscal Year '83 Budget Signing Ceremony (Feb 8, 82), Ronald Reagan Library, <http://www.reagan.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/20882a.htm>



In States where payments are highest, for instance, public assistance for a single mother can amount to much more than the usable income of a minimum wage job. In other words, it can pay for her to quit work. Many families are eligible for substantially higher benefits when the father is not present. What must it do to a man to know that his own children will be better off if he is never legally recognized as their father? Under existing welfare rules, a teenage girl who becomes pregnant can make herself eligible for welfare benefits that will set her up in an apartment of her own, provide medical care, and feed and clothe her. She only has to fulfill one condition -- not marry or identify the father.<sup>77</sup>

Stereotypes of "welfare cheats"<sup>78</sup> were prevalent, and not just in the administration. The public believed fraud was common.<sup>79</sup> The "typical family on welfare is generally portrayed as a female-headed household with children," leading to the term, the "feminization of poverty."<sup>80</sup> "Welfare queens" were perceived to have many children and suck resources out of the state, setting a bad example for their children and cycling dependency on welfare.<sup>81</sup> Mrs. Diane Cowafest, from Illinois, wrote the President about those receiving food stamps.

"I don't know if you realize it or not but the state of Illinois had been giving out food stamps for years and years and to people who are lazy, don't want to work, have many illegitimate children with no husbands, but still think something is due them... Yet when I get to the checkout line as I did yesterday there is a woman in front of me 'dressed to the nines' with her leather coat and boots and purse to match, buying all the best cuts of meat, butter, frozen desserts, etc. It's enough to make me scream..."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare Reform (Feb 15, 1986), <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1986/21586a.htm>

<sup>78</sup> Howard Glennerster and James Midgley, *The Radical Right and the Welfare State*. (Savage: Barnes and Noble Books, 1991), 67

<sup>79</sup> Kymlicka, 159

<sup>80</sup> Mark R. Rank, "Family Structure and the Process of Exiting from Welfare," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Aug, 1986), P. 607

<sup>81</sup> Randy Albelda, "What's Wrong With Welfare-to-Work," *Work, Welfare, and Politics*, p. 77

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Diane Cowafest to the President, February 13, 1981, folder "Welfare Reform (4)", box OA 9590, Robert Carleson Files, Ronald Reagan Library

Gwendolyn Mink argues that Reagan incited hostility towards caregivers who need welfare because they are poor and parenting alone, targeting women as "welfare queens".<sup>83</sup> 1980- 1988 saw a dramatic shift toward the religious right and an emphasis on family values; working single mothers were still seen as more deserving than those who did not work. Randy Albelda expands on the positive value of employment that was coupled with the negative value on receiving welfare. These "welfare queens" were "presumed to have loads of children, leech resources from the state, and then pass their dysfunctional behavior on to their children."<sup>84</sup>

The government regarded fraud and waste as serious problems. As Reagan quoted in his State of the Union Address in 1982, "Not only the taxpayers are defrauded; the people with real dependency on these programs are deprived of what they need, because available resources are going not to the needy, but to the greedy."<sup>85</sup>

In this war on fraud, it was overlooked that most recipients were rightful receivers. According to the USDA FNS, 72% of all food stamp recipients in August 1980 were either children, elderly, or single parents. The average gross income of households that were supported by food stamps was \$326 a month, under \$4,000 a year. 87% of food stamp recipients were under the poverty level; 97% of them were below 130% of the poverty level.<sup>86</sup> According to the Director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities during the Hearings of the Subcommittee on Nutrition in 1982, 90% of

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<sup>83</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 129

<sup>84</sup> Randy Albelda, Frances Fox Piven, Joan Acker, Margaret Hallock and Sandra Morgen, "What's Wrong with Welfare to Work", *Work, Welfare, and Politics: Confronting Poverty in the Wake of Welfare Reform* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 2002), 77

<sup>85</sup> Ronald Regan, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 26, 1982, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/12682c/htm>

<sup>86</sup> Senauer, p. 1011



food stamp households had gross incomes below the poverty line. The Director admits that "It was the programs targeted on the poor that took the largest percentage of reductions last year. These same programs are slated for even more severe cuts in the new Administration budget."<sup>87</sup>

The administration knew it was essential to get welfare recipients back to work in order to cut spending as well. It was not only beneficial to the government, but to the recipients as well. For this reason, the government put working guidelines into place. "Local jurisdictions may now require participants to work at public or private sector jobs and receive payment in coupons at the minimum wage."<sup>88</sup> Due to higher eligibility requirements, some said that the new means tests were a disincentive to work. It was interpreted by some that if you worked, you did not get food stamps.<sup>89</sup>

Some also felt that Reagan and his administration were not solely focused on the issue of fraud, waste, and abuse. Some authors, like Francis Piven felt the cuts were directed rather at the welfare recipients than at the problems in the programs. Because he believed he had a mandate, Reagan felt he could cut these programs because opposition was weak, although popular dissatisfaction was high. The swing voters that helped put Reagan in the presidency hoped to see "unemployment rates be reduced, not

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<sup>87</sup> "Statement of Robert Greenstein, Director, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities," Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Nutrition of the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, United States Senate 97<sup>th</sup> Congress Second Session, February 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1982, U.S. ( Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 178

<sup>88</sup> Senauer, p. 1010

<sup>89</sup> Evans, 130

unemployment benefits.”<sup>90</sup> He states that popular opinion was against Reagan on the issue of the welfare state but did not have enough voice to induce change.

### *Eligibility*

The main debate over welfare cuts was about *who* should receive welfare. Hopkins spent much time establishing who is deserving and who should not be given additional support. Those people who have no means to support themselves (such as the elderly, disabled, or extremely poor) should morally be assisted with these programs. It increasingly has been a goal of the federal government to cut back on fraud, waste, and abuse by cutting out the people from the programs that do not need the assistance. In fact, David Stockman, Reagan’s first budget director, said that he and his administration did not accept “the assumption that the Federal Government has a responsibility to supplement the incomes of the working poor.”<sup>91</sup> Hopkins used American values and terms to help lead society to believe that the cuts were better for those who make the money and that their money should not have to be taken from them.

Eligibility standards were fiercely negotiated. Approximately one million recipients lost their eligibility, composed of mainly wage earners and those with high housing costs. The new eligibility standards cut off anyone over 130% of the poverty line (with no deductions or exemptions) at \$12,096 for a family of four. The new standards also mandated the inclusion of all types of income to determine one’s eligibility for food stamps.

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<sup>90</sup> Piven, *The New Class War*, p. 6

<sup>91</sup> Weaver, 66



Hopkins described how money was being used incorrectly in the various programs. He used examples to show why measuring eligibility was the priority in the following year for welfare programs. He believed all forms of income, including school loans, should be considered to determine eligibility for programs. He used an example of a student at a university whose father makes six figures a year that was receiving food stamps but yet this next year is going to have to be cut out of the program.

Hopkins believed that these programs were harmful for the people enrolled in them. He claims the most harm went to the non-truly needy poor because it reduces their incentive to work. However, a prerequisite for the program is to have a job. He also claims that parents without the incentive to work will produce children without the incentive to work, continuing the cycle of dependency on welfare. Later in his report, however, he states that people try their best to get off welfare because it creates pride to be self-sufficient. According to Kent Weaver, the belief that poverty was due to individual failings was widespread and policymakers only supported these programs because there was no alternative.<sup>92</sup> The Reagan administration had taken a strong stand against dependency and those that did not support the policies were not seen as allies.

A "safety net" was also supposed to have also been put in place to make sure the deserving poor kept receiving support. This covered the elderly, disabled and extremely low-income citizens who absolutely needed help, keeping the focus of food stamps as a "nutrition assistance program for the dependent poor."<sup>93</sup> Reagan swore by this philosophy and guaranteed that he would not touch the incomes of these disadvantaged

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<sup>92</sup> Weaver, *The Reagan Revolution?*, 159

<sup>93</sup> Senauer, p. 1011

members of society. In his first State of the union speech in 1982, Reagan stated, "...this administration will not turn its back on America's elderly or America's poor. Under the new budget, funding for social insurance programs will be more than double the amount spent only 6 years ago."<sup>94</sup> Even though he claimed he would leave this group untouched, he still planned to cut the funding for these people as well. The Urban Institute concluded in their study that the "safety net" as it existed in the '70's was still "largely intact," but "Had the administration's proposals been adopted wholesale, even the truly needy (using the administration's relatively narrow definition) would have suffered substantial income losses."<sup>95</sup> This talk of a safety net was more of a rhetorical illusion than an actual policy, according to Michael Katz. David Stockman, OMB budget director, said that the list of safety net programs "was a happenstance list, just a spur of the moment thing that the [White House] press office wanted to put out." Martin Anderson, the White House domestic policy advisor, admitted, "Providing a safety net for those who cannot or are not expected to work was not really a policy objective. The term safety net was political shorthand that only made sense for a limited period of time."<sup>96</sup>

Scholars also scrutinized Reagan's method of lowering eligibility to cut back the budget. Kent Weaver has the view that the Reagan administration came into office with

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<sup>94</sup> Ronald Reagan, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 26, 1982, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/12682c.htm>

<sup>95</sup> Timothy M. Smeeding, "Is the Safety Net Still Intact?" *The Social Contract Revisited*. (Washington DC: Urban Institute Press, 1984), 116

<sup>96</sup> Katz, pp. 285-286, as originally quoted in the *Washington Post*, December 4, 1983 and July 8, 1983



ideas on how to change the programs, especially the AFDC.<sup>97</sup> Some of these ideas applied to limited coverage for workers and dismantling the system of work incentives.<sup>98</sup> This way, workers did not receive extra "income points" if they worked and received benefits. Joel Handler makes it clear that the deletion of work incentives clearly draws the line between the working poor and the welfare poor.<sup>99</sup>

### *Child Nutrition Program Reforms*

Society cares most about children in the food scenario. Food directly impacts children mentally and physically, affecting the child's health and educational ability. Children are also the "least capable of knowing and protecting their own interests," making our role as adults very obvious. Households with children received 79.5% of the food stamp benefits in August of 1980.<sup>100</sup> The presidency tried to cut corners by allowing ketchup to count as a vegetable in the nutrition pyramid, which created a huge objection by society for the very reason that children were vital.

Many letters from Fort Pierce, FL were written in to Senator Dole in regards to the cuts in the School lunch Program. Mrs. Fran Powell wrote,

"I am greatly concerned about the proposed budget cuts in the Child Care Foods Program. Most of the children enrolled in these programs are from low income families and depend on the CCFP to receive the daily required Vitamins that they need to remain healthy. So to cut the budget would cut

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<sup>97</sup> AFDC stands for Aid to Families with Dependent Children. It is another assistance program for families that also dealt with food stamps.

<sup>98</sup> Weaver, 66

<sup>99</sup> Joel F. Handler, *The Poverty of Welfare Reform*, 61

<sup>100</sup> Senauer, p. 1014

these most needed vitamins and nutritional need of these children. Before making these cuts please consider our future adult leaders."<sup>101</sup>

This is just one example of the many letters that poured in with support of the

Child Nutrition Programs against the threat of more budget cuts.

Child nutrition programs had reforms of their own. School breakfast and child-care programs were replaced with categorical grants given to the states at 80% of their original level. The summer feeding program and special milk program were eliminated, which had provided milk to 1.6 million children.<sup>102</sup> A total of \$1,461 billion dollars was estimated to be saved after the 1982 Child Nutrition Reductions, as stated in the Hearings before the Subcommittee on Nutrition in 1982. Changes included an extension of temporary changes made by FY '81 Reconciliation, income eligibility changes, school lunch reimbursement rate reductions, changes in the school breakfast program, child care food program, and summer food service program, as well as the elimination of the milk program.<sup>103</sup> In the School Lunch program, cuts to the school lunch program included reduced federal subsidies, limited income eligibility, elimination of the special milk program, and restrictions on the summer feeding program.<sup>104</sup> Those receiving an annual salary of more than 130% of the poverty level were cut out of the program.<sup>105</sup> 1.5 billion children lost their eligibility (a full third of the recipients) and no longer received free lunches. Further, meal prices increased sharply, making another two million drop out of

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<sup>101</sup> Letter from Mrs. Fran Powell, Fort Pierce, FLA to Senator Robert Dole, February 19, 1982, Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Nutrition of the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, United States Senate 97<sup>th</sup> Congress Second Session, February 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1982, U.S. ( Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 337

<sup>102</sup> Senauer, p. 1010

<sup>103</sup> Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Nutrition of the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, United States Senate 97<sup>th</sup> Congress Second Session, February 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1982, U.S. ( Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 149

<sup>104</sup> Piven, The New Class War, 17

<sup>105</sup> Evans, 130



the program. Due to the high opposition to these changes, the changes were withdrawn.<sup>106</sup>

Hopkins, claimed that no major or basic changes were recommended for FY '83, and Reagan supported this claim. However, four bills were at least introduced in the Congress to amend the Child Nutrition Act, which included school lunches.<sup>107</sup> These bills aimed at providing even more cuts to the already reduced program.<sup>108</sup> A lot of the previous rulings were reversed in later years due to controversy, such as ketchup being considered as a vegetable.

### *New Federalism*

The New Federalism program proposed that the federal government take over responsibility for Medicaid in exchange for the states taking over approximately sixty-one federal grant programs, which included food stamps and child nutrition programs. This was considered the most radical effort at welfare reform, for it sought to reduce welfare not just to Great Society levels of the sixties, but to take it all the way back to the New Deal levels.<sup>109</sup> The transition would be assisted by a temporary federal trust fund to help the states start managing the programs on their own.<sup>110</sup> To help fill the budget deficits as well, an excise tax would be imposed immediately but transferred to the states four years later.

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<sup>106</sup> Senauer, p. 1010

<sup>107</sup> "Principles of Welfare Reform," Kevin R. Hopkins, Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director, Office of Policy Information in the White House, Ronald Reagan Library

<sup>108</sup> S.CON.RES.121, H.CON.RES. 384, H.J.RES.599 (Which became public law), S.2165

<sup>109</sup> Davies, p. 218

<sup>110</sup> Weaver, p. 69



The AFDC and food nutrition programs were to be given to the states in the form of block grants. Hopkins believed the states were closer to the people, so the decisions made would reflect the popular will. Many could agree to this, but it could open it up to discrimination on the state level. Hopkins did not clarify if the states would receive funding based on their population or if all states would receive the same funding. He also wanted the states to take responsibility for erroneous payments as incentive to reduce waste. Hopkins claimed giving the programs to the states would reduce overhead costs because there will be less federal personnel involved in processing paperwork.

This reversal of role to the states followed the ideology of Reagan, who had always believed in limited government and instead in the power of the states. This program was "a project dear to Reagan's heart and one of the things that set his crowd apart from mainstream conservatives."<sup>111</sup> Reagan stated "You know and I know that neither the President nor the Congress can properly oversee this jungle of grants-in-aid; indeed, the growth of these grants has led to the distortion in the vital functions of government. As one Democratic Governor put it recently: The National Government should be worrying about 'arms control, not potholes'."<sup>112</sup>

Controversy arose over this decision from both sides of the table. Many believed that turning over food stamps to the states was a mistake because the states had "uneven economic resources, administrative capabilities, and commitment to equity for the least advantaged."<sup>113</sup> Conservatives did not want the administration to take on the growing

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<sup>111</sup> Davies, 217-218

<sup>112</sup> Ronald Reagan, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 26, 1982, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/12682c.htm>

<sup>113</sup> Senauer, p. 1013



Medicaid program and attacked the excise taxes. Advocates for the poor were also worried that welfare recipients in poor states would suffer more than those in states with sufficient funds.<sup>114</sup> Democrats claimed that the states would mismanage the programs and the poor would suffer. They worried that the states, with lack of a minimum benefit level, would "engage in a race to the bottom."<sup>115</sup> Many were afraid that in times of state recessions, states would choose to decrease the size of their assistance programs at the time when those very programs would be needed the most to stabilize the economy. Nationwide payments also mitigated regional differences in payments. If the programs were shifted to the states, "the human hardship placed on the needy in many locales would be increased and strong pressures for adverse migratory patterns could be created."<sup>116</sup>

Further, it would be difficult to pass a bill by hostile Democrat Representatives and other legislators that were hesitant to ceding power back to the states. The chairman of the New Federalism committee, David Durenberger (R-Minnesota) was strongly against the proposal, describing it as "baloney" and "the thinnest dodge I've ever seen." He posed it as "the biggest question of this election year: Does this administration- does my party- care about the poor? Is the 'new federalism' a smoke screen for a repeal of the New Deal? Is private sector initiatives a fig leaf to cover a lack of compassion?"<sup>117</sup> Governors were hesitant or even resistant in taking over the programs due to waning

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<sup>114</sup> Weaver, 69

<sup>115</sup> As quoted in The Reagan Presidency, 215

<sup>116</sup> Senauer, p. 1013

<sup>117</sup> As quoted in The Reagan Presidency, 215



budgets because of the current recession.<sup>118</sup> Even the media was against the new proposal, saying "states are not capable of handling distribution."<sup>119</sup> (more from this article) Joel Handler shows that many states filed waivers to receive help in managing their welfare programs. A Low-Income Opportunity Advisory Board was created to accelerate state's requests. This board was hailed as a very important change in federalism during the Reagan years.<sup>120</sup>

Reagan tried hard to make his plan work. In response to the overwhelming criticism, He reversed himself by promising to veto any tax increases. "I will seek no tax increases this year, and I have no intention of retreating from our basic program of tax relief. I promise to bring the American people- to bring their tax rates down and to keep them down. I will stand by my word."<sup>121</sup> After trying a round of accommodations to please all parties, the federalism plan foundered and was never even introduced to Congress. It ultimately showed how isolated, both ideologically and institutionally, the "Reaganites" had become after his initial period of triumph. Governors had actually wanted "administrative autonomy combined with the full *federalization* of all income maintenance programs." They did not believe Reagan's claim that the states would not benefit through the process.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Weaver, 69

<sup>119</sup> Dr. Jean Mayer, "The Food Stamp Dilemma," The Washington Post, Thursday, February 18, 1982 (Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations and Nutrition), 282

<sup>120</sup> Joel F. Handler, The Poverty of Welfare Reform, 96

<sup>121</sup> Address Before a Joint Session of Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, January 26, 1982

<sup>122</sup> Davies, p.218



## *Public Opinion*

The public opinion on Reagan ranged greatly, especially since he served eight years in public office. He was welcome with open arms in his first couple years but gradually faith in him declined. The choices he made influenced the public's opinion of him, and steadily his approval ratings declined.

Many critics have called these welfare reforms the "war on welfare." Michael Katz strongly believes this was the case: the Reagan administration "has launched an offensive against social welfare and used tax policy to widen the gap between the rich and the poor."<sup>123</sup> Alex Waddan was not a fan of Reagan's budget cuts and saw "the president as no friend of a generous public assistance state." Waddan has said that Reagan instead of asking "How can we help the poor?" asked "How can we cut costs, and how can we get people to work?"<sup>124</sup>

Howard Zinn is also a critic of Ronald Reagan's budget cuts towards the poor. He sees that welfare became the object of attack, especially through Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, and the school lunch program. The new eligibility requirements cut out one million children from the program that depended on school lunches for half of their daily nutrition.<sup>125</sup> He also feels that the Democrats were just as detrimental towards the social programs as the Republicans, but the two groups together

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<sup>123</sup> Katz, 274

<sup>124</sup> Waddan, 212

<sup>125</sup> Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, p. 578



through heavy media coverage did not succeed in “eradicating a fundamental generosity felt by most Americans.”<sup>126</sup>

There were many people across the nation that believed that Reagan wasn’t providing enough for the poor. David Hartman of ABC News interviewed Ronald Reagan before the election in 1984. In retrospect to Reagan’s first four years in office, David brings up a very touchy subject. He states, “But, Mr. President, there are people across this country, the truly needy, the down-and-out, the poor, who look at you, and they say, ‘Yeah, he is the nicest man, and we like him; but his policies are causing misery. They’re hurting us. We’re hungry.’ And they don’t understand. They say, ‘If he cares that much, why are we hurting?’”<sup>127</sup>

The society as a whole felt that the Reagan had assisted in the higher poverty level in 1982 and did not care. In April of 1982, a poll concluded that only 30% of Americans felt that Reagan’s policies were fair to the poor, while 62% considered them unfair.<sup>128</sup> Americans were asked by CBS and the *New York Times* what their preferred method of cutting the budget would be. Shockingly, 59% favored a reduced tax cut from the year before, 49% endorsed cuts in defense spending, but only 29% thought cuts in antipoverty spending would be necessary.<sup>129</sup>

Howard Zinn also shows that Reagan actually only won 27% of the popular vote in 1980, even though it was called a landslide victory. Zinn gets this figure by taking into account the nearly half of the population that did not vote, thus reducing

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<sup>126</sup> Zinn, p. 579

<sup>127</sup> “Interview with David Hartman of ABC News on the 1984 Presidential Election”, January 30, 1984, [www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1984/13084c.htm](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1984/13084c.htm)

<sup>128</sup> Davies, p. 215

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p. 215



Reagan's 51.6% to a mere 27% overwhelming victory.<sup>130</sup> He has been said to have taken this victory as a mandate for change. If these figures could be considered truer than his electoral victory, he was not as accepted by the public as previously thought.

There were still others that supported Reagan through all his decisions. In a letter to the President, dated February 13, 1981, and written by an Illinois woman, reveals that many held true to Reagan despite all the criticism. She says "There is someone in the White House that finally understands what has to be done." Some other authors claim that Reagan actually increased spending on welfare during his term. Thomas E. Woods, Jr. says that the annual *rate of increase* in government spending may have slowed, but still continued to increase. Martin Anderson, a policy advisor to Reagan, stated in his memoirs that President Reagan "[held] to his many pledges over the years to strengthen social security, the health care system, and welfare, and to build up our national defenses, he directed massive increases in social welfare and welfare spending and for national defense."<sup>131</sup> This goes completely against what Reagan claimed was his goal, which was not to strengthen welfare, but to make the necessary cuts to it. Woods takes the spending as a whole, from 1981 to 1989 and generalizes that welfare spending increased, especially in the programs that pertain to families and children. Thomas uses figures that food stamps from 1981-1989 experienced a 6% cut and school lunch programs endured a 4% cut, which is an average of the 1981 cuts and the later additions of funds to the programs. In his very next sentence, Thomas says, "But overall, spending on programs that included children and families increased by 18 percent between 1981 and 1989."

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<sup>130</sup> Zinn, p. 611

<sup>131</sup> Thomas E. Woods, The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History, p. 236

Food stamps and school lunches make up about half of the programs he's referring to; these two programs did not go through an increase, and instead were cut dramatically, especially in Reagan's first year. Woods believes there was no greed involved, nor tax cuts, nor budget cuts. He believes that the problem was that Reagan had not done more of what he had hoped to do, and that Reagan had not done too much.<sup>132</sup>

Reagan was able to get things accomplished in the eighties that would have been unheard of in the 1960s or 1970s and made his positions intellectually respectable. According to Thomas E. Woods, Jr., many factors made this possible. Reagan was a very popular man, and can be seen in many popularity polls taken of the president, even through the Iran-Contra scandal. His opinion, which came out in his speeches, really affected the public at large and helped mold the public perspective, especially of welfare. Reagan's "confidence in the American entrepreneurial spirit" gave many hope in opportunity and his "belief in the moral superiority of the free market" was seen in the ever-enduring struggle to privatize businesses and downplay government intervention became popular stances in the eighties where they would be absurd in the previous two decades.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Woods, p. 237

<sup>133</sup> Thomas J. Woods, Jr., The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History, The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History. Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004, 231



## *Conclusion*

Food stamps and child nutrition programs were an important part of welfare. They composed an essential part of federal assistance, yet were targeted in the budget cuts of the eighties. These programs underwent severe changes, especially in 1981, but were later brought back to almost-normal levels due to widespread disagreement over the cuts.

Ronald Reagan, the president of the eighties, played a large role in the budget cuts. Reagan cared most about balancing the budget. In making cuts, his goal was to cut back the spending to only those who he believed truly deserved it, but at the same time cut out the marginally poor. Further, he lied to the nation about the spending on the programs to help make the cuts more tolerable. The ambition he had to change the programs did not amount to much, and he blamed his lack of accomplishment on Congress, although they worked hard for reform as well.

The administration had a big agenda for welfare reform but it seems their plan was a little too ambitious. A lot of the changes made in Reagan's first term were reversed in his second term.<sup>134</sup> It seems they wanted to reduce the programs to only include the very bottom percentage of the poor and save money on the rest of the cuts. It was irrational to expect the amount of savings they aspired to, especially without looking at all the factors tied into the funding for the programs.

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<sup>134</sup> Davics, 212

Public views on welfare depended how the situation was worded to how they would respond. The public preferred in-kind benefits to be handed out versus cash grants, but sometimes preferred welfare to be cuts down. The public was ready for a change in the system to reduce fraud, waste, and abuse and Reagan was a great candidate to make that change, for he wanted to make major cuts in the system to balance the budget.

Reagan had a lot of influence but the country was already moving in the direction of welfare reform as it was. Carter helped lead the way with the beginning of reform in the 70's and Reagan attempted to complete the task. I think it was the right time for Reagan, for the country needed a change, especially to balance the budget. It would still take yet another president to accomplish the tedious task of balancing the budget. Society seemed divided on the issue of welfare, especially when it came to the way it was worded. Reagan had a way of persuading the country with his speeches to make to the cuts that he wanted to. Although society wanted change, they were reluctant to accept the proposed measures.

Many people liked Reagan because he was a "nice guy" and came across well to the public, but at the same time many were angry with him for unnecessarily restricting spending on the poor. Reagan's speeches were effective in shaping the public's opinion of certain issues, including welfare, and used key phrases to receive support. His support base seemed to decline as his proposals started to take form, thus reducing his effectiveness as a president.



Food stamps and child nutrition programs faced budget cuts in the eighties, but were not cut out of our society. They are still seen as one of the largest in-kind beneficial programs that are provided by the federal government. Food programs continue to live on and help disadvantaged poor that in many cases are trying to achieve their own independence from the system of welfare.

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