

CNN Politics

Return of the 'Welfare Queen'

By **John Blake**, CNN
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She's out there, lurking in the 2012 presidential race like a horror movie villain who refuses to die.

She has 12 Social Security cards, mooches on benefits from four fake dead husbands, and collects food stamps while driving a Cadillac. She rakes in about \$150,000 a year in welfare benefits and, of course, people assume she *must* be African-American.

President Ronald Reagan gave America a sunny "Morning in America" optimism, but he also gave it the "Welfare Queen," an infamous character who has re-emerged in this year's presidential race.

Critics have accused the three leading Republican presidential candidates of resurrecting Reagan's Welfare Queen by calling President Obama the "food stamp president," implying that blacks live off other people's money, and by declaring that America is moving toward an "entitlement society."

Yet few people have examined the story behind the birth of the Welfare Queen. Did she really exist? Why do people still talk about her when welfare ended 15 years ago? Can her story still swing voters at a time when the great recession has forced more whites to rely on government assistance?

For some, the Welfare Queen is an epic political lie. Reagan invented her, and Americans keep buying the lie.

"It's one of those persistent symbols that come up every election cycle," says Kaaryn Gustafson, author of ["Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty."](#)

"This image of the lazy African-American woman who refuses to get a job and keeps having kids is pretty enduring. It's always been a good way to distract the public from any meaningful conversations about poverty and inequality. "

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Kaaryn Gustafson, author of "Cheating Welfare"

For others, the Welfare Queen reveals an uncomfortable truth: More Americans have turned the social safety net into a hammock.

"You hear these horror stories going around that people are buying junk food with food stamps and paying cash for vodka and beer and things not covered with food stamps -- that gets people mad," says Steven Hayward, author of ["The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order: 1964-1980."](#)

The Welfare Queen has become such a legendary character in political circles that her existence is treated like Bigfoot. Most scholars say she never existed, while a few insist the truth is out there.

Gustafson went in search of the Welfare Queen and discovered something surprising.

There wasn't one Welfare Queen, she says. There were three.

The birth of the Welfare Queen story

Here's how Reagan first told the story when he ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976. At virtually every campaign stop, he attacked welfare chiselers by bringing out the same character, according to press accounts.

"There's a woman in Chicago," Reagan said, according to an article in the now-defunct Washington Star. "She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards. ... She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000."

It was a powerful story, but reporters investigating it concluded it wasn't quite true. Some said it may have been based on a then-47-year-old woman in Chicago, but that Reagan wildly exaggerated her abuses.

In time, though, it didn't matter what reporters said. People started repeating the story as true.

"It hangs together as a good story because it's consistent with people's perception of the real world," says Craig R. Smith, who was a speechwriter for former President Gerald Ford and a consulting writer with President George H.W. Bush.

"Like in any good mythology, you need heroes and villains and in the Welfare Queen, you had a villain who was taking advantage of the system."

Was the Welfare Queen a racist story?

Smith doesn't think so. He says Reagan always opposed segregation, and had a "terrific record" combating racism as president of the Screen Actors Guild.

"Reagan was very sensitive about being called a racist," says Smith, author of "Rhetoric and Human Consciousness: A History." "The minute anybody would say something about that, he would get upset. He would say fraud is fraud."

Others say the Welfare Queen story stuck because it exploited white America's racial fears.

Reagan never said the Welfare Queen was black, but he didn't need to. People assumed she was because of rhetorical clues Reagan dropped, says John Hinshaw, a history professor at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania.

"The Welfare Queen driving a pink Cadillac to cash her welfare checks at the liquor store fits a narrative that many white, working-class Americans had about inner-city blacks," Hinshaw says. "It doesn't matter if the story was fabricated, it fit the narrative, and so it felt true, and it didn't need to be verified."

For at least one woman on welfare at the time, the story was brutal.

Madeleine Burbank grew up in the 1950s in a white family in which everybody worked. She says she was forced to go on welfare in the 1970s after her marriage suddenly ended and she had to raise three children alone.

She still remembers the humiliation of going into crowded, dirty waiting rooms to answer embarrassingly personal questions posed by welfare screening officials.

Reagan's story validated some of the worst assumptions some Americans have about poor people, she says. Burbank escaped welfare after enrolling in a government program that retrained her as a counselor. She eventually retired as a psychology teacher at a community college.

Still, she remembers being ashamed to tell people she was on welfare, even those who were close to her.

Once, she was standing in a supermarket checkout line when her sister whispered disparaging comments about a woman in front of them who was using food stamps to buy junk food.

"When I told her I was on food stamps, she told me that I was different. I wasn't somehow like 'those people,' " Burbank says. "She couldn't stand the reality that I really wasn't that different. It's too painful for people to admit that their life can be like that."

Resurrection of the Welfare Queen?

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Steven Hayward, author of "The Age of Reagan"

Are Republican presidential candidates offering voters an updated version of the Welfare Queen?

That's the question ricocheting around political circles today as commentators argue over recent comments made by Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, and Mitt Romney.

Many have heard snippets of them by now:

While campaigning in Iowa, Santorum said "I don't want to make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money." He later said he didn't mean to say black people, but meant people.

Romney has repeatedly said that Obama wants to transform America into an "entitlement society."

Gingrich has attracted the most attention for his language. He called Obama a food-stamp president, questioned poor children's work ethic, and said poor people should want paychecks, not handouts.

There was nothing racist about any of that language, or the Welfare Queen story, says Hayward, author of "The Age of Reagan," and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, which includes conservative leaders such as Lynne Cheney, wife of former vice president Dick Cheney.

Gingrich was simply being factual when he said more Americans are on food stamps under Obama than any other president, he says. He was making a point about an unhealthy economy.

"Gingrich would say that if Obama was white," Hayward says.

The candidates are using such language to highlight philosophical differences between liberals and conservatives, Hayward says. Liberals believe that government can offer the best path to advancement. Conservatives believe a growing private economy provides more upward mobility than government.

The "entitlement society" phrase has nothing to do with race, either, Hayward says. It reflects the belief that people should create their own opportunities, not government.

"Somewhere in the entitlement mentality is the idea of redistribution: You transfer resources from the relatively richer to the poorer," Hayward says.

The problem Republicans run into when they talk about race and economics is that most don't know how to talk about race, says Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank in Washington.

What some people perceive as racism is often just a Republican politician's poor choice of words, he says.

"They trip over themselves and it sounds terribly awkward. By and large, they tend to live in white communities, and they don't know how to talk to blacks because they don't do it. "

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Former Republican presidential candidate Jack Kemp was an exception in Tanner's mind. Kemp sounded comfortable talking to a black audience, Tanner says, noting that he was a former NFL quarterback.

"He shared locker rooms with black players. He knew them on a personal level in a way that Romney or Gingrich don't."

Demise of the Welfare Queen

Candidates will no doubt need to learn how to better communicate with nonwhite voters in the future: They're going to be the majority by 2050, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Demographic changes will do to the Welfare Queen story what fact-checking couldn't do -- discredit it, says Saladin Ambar, a political scientist at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. No candidate in the future will be able to win over a majority of voters by spouting racially loaded messages.

Ambar says Republican presidential nominee John McCain received about 59% of the white vote in the 2008 presidential election, but still lost.

"He got the same percentage of the white vote that Reagan got in 1980, but lost by seven points to Obama," Ambar says.

Welfare Queen-like rhetoric won't work anymore, because the face of poverty is no longer dark, others say.

Recent census data revealed that a record number of Americans, 48.6%, live in a household receiving some form of government benefits, the Wall Street Journal reported.

"The Welfare Queen has lost its potency during this recession because all over this country you see white people lining up to get unemployment, feeding their families at food pantries, sleeping in cars and using food stamps at the local grocery," says Mark Naison, a history professor at Fordham University in New York.

Perhaps the Welfare Queen actually should have died a long time ago. President Clinton and a Republican-controlled congress ended welfare in 1996. Its successor is called TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Gustafson, author of "Cheating Welfare," says TANF is not an unconditional entitlement. It comes with time-limits and work requirements and recipients have to go through a bureaucratic gantlet to verify their eligibility.

"A lot of poor people are working," she says. "They are the people giving you change when you buy coffee in the morning or handing you your dry cleaning. These are the people who rely on public benefits."

Still, an actual Welfare Queen did exist, Gustafson says.

A database search of all major newspapers turned up the first use of the term in 1974, when a woman in Chicago was given the label.

Two additional women were also dubbed welfare queens in subsequent years by local newspapers. Both were based in Los Angeles. One collected \$377,458 in welfare benefits in seven years and lived in a house with a swimming pool. She did drive a Cadillac, along with a Rolls Royce and Mercedes Benz, Gustafson discovered.

Reagan merged the identities of all three and exaggerated their abuses, Gustafson says.

"Reagan twisted them around and created one character, and tried to leave everyone with the impression that it was happening all over the place," Gustafson says. "It's totally false that these women typified welfare recipients."

While others believe the Welfare Queen will be dethroned, Gustafson remains unconvinced.

"I would love to think that will happen," she says. "But I'm hearing politicians say poor people need to learn how to work or that we need to drug test welfare recipients -- it makes me think that even if people aren't directly invoking the Welfare Queen stereotype, they are indirectly.

"The ghost of the Welfare Queen is still lurking."