



How The Liberal Welfare State Destroyed Black America

What Democrat voters and political leaders refuse to believe.

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When President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 launched the so-called War on Poverty, which enacted an unprecedented amount of antipoverty legislation and added many new layers to the American welfare state, he explained that his objective was to reduce dependency, “break the cycle of poverty,” and make “taxpayers out of tax eaters.” Johnson further claimed that his programs would bring to an end the “conditions that breed despair and violence,” those being “ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs.” Of particular concern to Johnson was the disproportionately high rate of black poverty. In a famous June 1965 speech, the president suggested that the problems plaguing black Americans could not be solved by self-help: “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line in a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,'” said Johnson.

Thus began modern liberalism's vicious and unrelenting assault on black Americans. Dressed up as “compassion” and “social justice,” this assault took the form of an unprecedented commitment of federal funds to a wide range of measures aimed at redistributing wealth in the United States. Since 1965, more than \$22 trillion of taxpayer money (in constant 2012 dollars) has been spent on means-tested welfare programs for the poor.

The economic milieu in which the War on Poverty arose is noteworthy. As of 1965, the number of Americans living below the official poverty line had been declining continuously since the beginning of the decade and was only about half of what it had been fifteen years earlier. Between 1950 and 1965, the proportion of people whose earnings put them below the poverty level, had decreased by more than 30%. The black poverty rate in particular had been cut nearly in half between 1940 and 1960. And in various skilled trades during the period of 1936-59, the incomes of blacks relative to those of whites had more than doubled.

Despite these trends, the welfare state expanded dramatically after LBJ's statement. Between the mid-Sixties and the mid-Seventies, the dollar value of public housing quintupled and the amount spent on food stamps rose more than tenfold. From 1965-69, government-provided benefits increased by a factor of 8; by 1974 such benefits were an astounding 20 times higher than they had been in 1965. Also as of 1974, federal spending on social-welfare programs

amounted to 16% of America's Gross National Product, a far cry from the 8% figure of 1960. By 1977 the number of people receiving public assistance had more than doubled since 1960.

The most devastating by-product of the mushrooming welfare state was the corrosive effect it had on American family life, particularly in the black community. As provisions in welfare laws offered ever-increasing economic incentives for shunning marriage and avoiding the formation of two-parent families, illegitimacy rates rose dramatically.

For the next few decades, means-tested welfare programs such as food stamps, public housing, Medicaid, day care, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families penalized marriage. A mother generally received far more money from welfare if she was single rather than married. Once she took a husband, her benefits were instantly reduced by roughly 10 to 20 percent. As a Cato Institute study noted, welfare programs for the poor incentivize the very behaviors that are most likely to perpetuate poverty. Another Cato report observed:

“Of course women do not get pregnant just to get welfare benefits.... But, by removing the economic consequences of out-of-wedlock birth, welfare has removed a major incentive to avoid such pregnancies. A teenager looking around at her friends and neighbors is liable to see several who have given birth out-of-wedlock. When she sees that they have suffered few visible consequences ... she is less inclined to modify her own behavior to prevent pregnancy.... Current welfare policies seem to be designed with an appalling lack of concern for their impact on out-of-wedlock births. Indeed, Medicaid programs in 11 states actually provide infertility treatments to single women on welfare.”

The marriage penalties that are embedded in welfare programs can be particularly severe if a woman on public assistance weds a man who is employed in a low-paying job. As a FamilyScholars.org report puts it: “When a couple's income nears the limits prescribed by Medicaid, a few extra dollars in income cause thousands of dollars in benefits to be lost. What all of this means is that the two most important routes out of poverty—marriage and work—are heavily taxed under the current U.S. system.”

William Galston, who served in the '90s as Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, estimated that the welfare system, with its economic disincentives to marriage, was responsible for at least 15% to 20% of the family disintegration in the United States. Libertarian scholar Charles Murray has placed the figure at somewhere around 50%. By Murray's reckoning, the growth and increased liberalization of the “welfare complex” have eroded the traditional ethos of working-class communities that once held people who worked at low-wage jobs, and men who married the mothers of their children, in much higher esteem than unwed parents who became wards of the state.

The results of welfare policies discouraging marriage and family were dramatic, as out-of-wedlock birthrates skyrocketed among all demographic groups in the U.S., but most notably African Americans. In the mid-1960s, the out-of-wedlock birth rate was scarcely 3% for whites, 7.7% for Americans overall, and 24.5% among blacks. By 1976, those figures had risen to nearly 10% for whites, 24.7% for Americans as a whole, and 50.3% for blacks specifically. And today, the numbers stand at 29% for whites, 41% for the nation overall, and 73% for blacks. In other words, the entire country is moving rapidly in the wrong direction, but blacks in particular have

reached a point of veritable catastrophe.

The devastating societal consequences of family breakdown cannot be overstated. Father-absent families—black and white alike—generally occupy the bottom rung of America's economic ladder. Regardless of race or ethnicity, the poverty rate for single parents with children is several times higher than the corresponding rate for married couples with children. According to Robert Rector, senior research fellow with the Heritage Foundation, “the absence of marriage increases the frequency of child poverty 700 percent” and thus constitutes the single most reliable predictor of a self-perpetuating underclass. Articulating a similar theme many years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Nothing is so much needed as a secure family life for a people to pull themselves out of poverty.”

Children in single-parent households are burdened not only with economic, but also profound social and psychological, disadvantages. For example, youngsters raised by single parents, as compared to those who grow up in intact married homes, are more likely to be physically abused; to display emotional disorders; to smoke, drink, and use drugs; to perform poorly in school; to be suspended or expelled from school; to drop out of high school; to behave aggressively and violently; to be arrested for a juvenile crime; to serve jail time before age 30; and to go on to experience poverty as adults. According to the National Fatherhood Initiative, 60% of rapists, 72% of adolescent murderers, and 70% of long-term prison inmates are men who grew up in fatherless homes. With regard to girls in particular, those raised by single mothers are more than twice as likely to give birth out-of-wedlock, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty for yet another generation.

The calamitous breakdown of the black family is a comparatively recent phenomenon, coinciding precisely with the rise of the welfare state. Throughout the epoch of slavery and into the early decades of the twentieth century, most black children grew up in two-parent households. Post-Civil War studies revealed that most black couples in their forties had been together for at least twenty years. In southern urban areas around 1880, nearly three-fourths of black households were husband- or father-present; in southern rural settings, the figure approached 86%. As of 1940, the illegitimacy rate among blacks nationwide was approximately 15%—scarcely one-fifth of the current figure. As late as 1950, black women were more likely to be married than white women, and only 9% of black families with children were headed by a single parent.

During the nine decades between the Emancipation Proclamation and the 1950s, the black family remained a strong, stable institution. Its cataclysmic destruction was subsequently set in motion by such policies as the anti-marriage incentives that were built into the welfare system. As George Mason University professor Walter E. Williams puts it: “The welfare state has done to black Americans what slavery couldn't do, what Jim Crow couldn't do, what the harshest racism couldn't do. And that is to destroy the black family.” Hoover Institution Fellow Thomas Sowell concurs: “The black family, which had survived centuries of slavery and discrimination, began rapidly disintegrating in the liberal welfare state that subsidized unwed pregnancy and changed welfare from an emergency rescue to a way of life.”