



## *The Legacy of 'Welfare Reform' and a Poverty of Ideas*

By Charles P. Pierce

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**Once upon a time at spring training**, Reggie Jackson was talking about his place in baseball history. "I know I'm not the greatest player of all time," he said to a few of us, "but I'd like to be *in the conversation*." Well, if the topic turns to the best reporter of the past 20 years, then Jason DeParle is in the conversation. All during the Clinton years, when "welfare reform" was all the rage in both parties, and both parties had adopted the "welfare dependency" frame into which conservatives had been squeezing any social-welfare program roughly since half-past the Irish Famine, DeParle — along with Katherine Boo of *The Washington Post* — was the go-to source if you wanted to know what consequences the grand designs of all these think-tank cowboys and opportunistic pols were having on the people most directly affected by them. Not that his reporting had any real effect on the policies that were adopted. Bill Clinton needed to shore up his right flank and reformed the federal welfare system into non-existence in 1996. (Dick Morris, it was said, took someone's toe out of his mouth and cheered.) There was the usual howling from the weepy Left, which was ignored as it always is, and there were some warnings, from people who actually knew what they were talking about: The numbers of people trimmed off the welfare rolls to measure the success of the policy meant that the several states would go utterly wild in doing so and, as a result, the policy inevitably would cause untold pain and misery in those areas of society left outside that crude metric. But there was a tech boom, and a housing bubble, so everybody cheered the great bipartisan success of welfare reform. In fact, on the campaign trail this year, both Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum — and have I mentioned recently what a colossal dick he is? — have claimed personal credit for the epochal achievement in American politics.

And now, here comes DeParle again with the butcher's bill, A1 right [in this Sunday's Times](#):

*But the distress of the last four years has added a cautionary postscript: **much as overlooked critics of the restrictions once warned**, a program that built its reputation when times were good offered little help when jobs disappeared. Despite the worst economy in decades, the cash welfare rolls have*

*barely budged. Faced with flat federal financing and rising need, Arizona is one of 16 states that have cut their welfare caseloads further since the start of the recession — in its case, by half. Even as it turned away the needy, Arizona spent most of its federal welfare dollars on other programs, using permissive rules to plug state budget gaps.*

Sometimes, I think we should hang the phrase, "much as overlooked critics once warned" in blinding pink neon down one side of the Washington Monument. "Overlooked critics" said Iraq would be a mess. "Overlooked critics" said massive tax cuts for the wealthy would balloon the deficit. "Overlooked critics" said engaging in "welfare reform" based on fanciful theories about "dependency," and fairy tales about young bucks buying steaks and welfare queens with their Cadillacs, and measuring the whole thing by how many people you can trim from government assistance, was asking for the whole problem to come cascading down through the levels of government, from national to local, from Washington to the states to the cities and towns, until it simply buried the people at the very bottom of society. Sometimes, I think we'd actually do better not to "overlook" some critics.

*"My take on it was the states would push people off and not let them back on, and that's just what they did," said Peter B. Edelman, a law professor at Georgetown University who resigned from the Clinton administration to protest the law. "It's been even worse than I thought it would be."*

A note here about Bill Clinton. We love him around here. He has more ideas on more serious issues than any two people alive. He is preternaturally disposed to look for solutions even if he has to reach out to people who spent a flat decade looking for his head on a plate. He held off the armies of the militant Right as well as anyone could. He's as tough as he is smart. But "welfare reform" has turned out to be a lemon; outside of repealing Glass-Steagall, it's probably the biggest of his presidency. It always was an illusion, its "success" completely dependent on a very unlikely proposition that a boom economy was permanent. There were people who told him that at the time, and not merely Peter Edelman, who quit because he saw what was coming, and not merely Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whom nobody ever called a bleeding heart. Here is where I get to tell [the story about Marcus Stephens](#) again.

Marcus Stephens was a little boy from New Albany, Mississippi. He was born with a malformed heart. For five years, his family received \$446 a month from the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program of Social Security. Among other things, this enabled his family to get him to and from Memphis to see his doctor. This is what his doctor said about him:

*"This was a person with a wonderful joie de vivre," Chase says. "He was a tough little kid that way — very affable, but seriously ill. He could drink a glass of water and go into heart failure."*

Now, all this happened as the political momentum was building in both parties behind "welfare reform." The SSI was a ripe target, and for a number of reasons, most prominent among them political opportunism and some of the worst Beltway journalism in an era full of really godawful Beltway journalism, the SSI program was one of the principal casualties of "welfare reform." As part of the bill that Clinton signed as part of his re-

election strategy, everyone enrolled in the SSI program since 1990 had their cases "re-evaluated." Nobody had any illusions about what that meant. It meant: cut the rolls. From the top down, that was the way the success of "welfare reform" would be defined. Three weeks after Clinton was re-elected, 260,000 children and their families were told that their membership in the SSI was under review. Marcus Stephens was one of those kids.

Even after Clinton was sworn in for another term, some people kept warning him that, while perhaps not meaning to do so, he'd fashioned a meat-axe for people to swing at what already was a shredded safety net. In April of 1997, a bipartisan group of senators — including Bob Dole, who'd lost to Clinton the previous fall — sent a letter to the White House saying quite plainly that the winnowing of the SSI program under welfare reform was being done with little or not regard to the effects on the people involved, or the facts on the ground of each individual case. In part, the letter told Clinton:

*It is our fear that the level of disability the SSA is proposing to adopt will place children with disabilities at risk.*

On April 15, 1997, Marcus Stephens's doctor told the SSI office that the little boy had been placed on a list for a heart transplant, without which he would surely die. (We know that the local Social Security office was aware of his condition because a woman named Brenda Smithers put a note to that effect in his file.) At that point, Marcus was completely bedridden. On May 27, Marcus Stephens was cut off from his SSI payments. In November, Social Security "secretly" reviewed his case, and reiterated that, under the new SSI qualification standards put into place by "welfare reform," Marcus Stephens, who was bedridden, dying, and waiting for a new heart that never would come, was not in their opinion "disabled." Marcus died that December.

**This is the way it works.** This is the way it always has worked, ever since Bill Clinton committed the Democratic party to a technocratic, basically conservative approach to "welfare reform." (You will note that the architect of TANF, the program that replaced the old AFDC system, came not from the Cato Institute or the Heritage Society, but the centrist Brookings Institute.) It works reasonably well — all that sustaining mythology about lazy poor people was belied by how the employment numbers boomed in the 1990's, when there actually were jobs — until the economy goes south, and then the jobs dry up and, lo and behold, we discover that the states have been using the money to plug budget gaps and for all kinds of other parochial purposes. The nation winds up with thousands of Marcus Stephenses. Meanwhile, as DeParle reports, the entrepreneurial spirit flourishes:

*Several women acknowledged that they had resorted to shoplifting, including one who took orders for brand-name clothes and sold them for half-price. Asked how she got cash, one woman said flatly, "We rob wetbacks" — illegal immigrants, who tend to carry cash and avoid the police. At least nine times, she said, she has flirted with men and led them toward her home, where accomplices robbed them.*

The fact is that "welfare reform" gave everybody permission not to care about poverty anymore. It gave preening gombeens like Rick Santorum a chance to talk about "character" and "hope." It gave the zombie-eyed granny-starver Paul Ryan a chance to

mouth off about the law's "unprecedented success," although I'm not sure if he's ever explained fully how hard the culture of dependency was on him when he was going through his teenage years on Social Security survivor's benefits. It gave the political system generally, and at every level, a chance to think about anything else. It was positioned as a unalloyed triumph. It had solved poverty. And then, of course, the economy went bad.

*Mr. Haskins, the Temporary Assistance program's architect, agrees that poverty at the bottom "is not as bad as it seems," but adds, "It's still pretty darn bad."*

I have no idea what this man is talking about here. What's not as bad as it seems? Women sticking up "wetbacks"? Kids rooting through garbage for aluminum cans? That we're not yet Mumbai or Rio? Pretty darn bad, indeed.

Luckily, though, we have people like Rick Warren, Barack Obama's favorite mega-pastor, who [explained biblical economics](#) to Jake Tapper on ABC on Easter morning:

*But regardless of all the problems that we see out there, I think they all have at their root a spiritual cause. And we have overspent.... We have not been a responsible — we've bought things we didn't need with money we didn't have to impress people we didn't even like. And now we're paying the piper. And you cannot ignore the principles of finance that are in God's word, and they are in the Book of Proverbs. It's quite clear, they're principles of business, principles of economics that are actually in the Bible.... And when you ignore these things, then we're going to get deeper and deeper into debt, and then we can't blame God for that.... The biggest problem for all of our economic problems is our inability to delay gratification. I want it and I want it now, and I'm going to buy it even if I can't afford it. And not only have people done that, the government's done it.*

Tapper pushed back against this faith-based palaver... well, no, actually, he didn't:

*The government has certainly done that. They're are big debates here in California and nationally about how to solve the problems of the deficit, how to solve the problem of — of spending much more than we take in. Some are using religion to make their arguments...*

To which Rev. Warren, that purpose-driven Christian, replied:

*Well, certainly the Bible says we are to care about the poor. There's over 2,000 verses in the Bible about the poor. And God says that those who care about the poor, God will care about them and God will bless them. But there's a fundamental question on the meaning of "fairness." Does fairness mean everybody makes the same amount of money? Or does fairness mean everybody gets the opportunity to make the same amount of money? I do not believe in wealth redistribution, I believe in wealth creation.... The only way to get people out of poverty is J-O-B-S. Create jobs. To create wealth, not to subsidize wealth. When you subsidize people, you create the dependency. You — you rob them of dignity. There are a lot of negative things that happen to us. Rather, we should be focusing on wealth creation and job creation, in my opinion... I hold everybody responsible for that. I hold the people who got themselves in debt. I hold the government that got themselves in debt. I hold multiple administrations. It's not the fault of any one person. There's plenty enough blame to be passed around.*

Today's reading is from the First Epistle Of Charles Murray To The Deadbeats. Rick Warren, Father Confessor to America's hedge funds.

We have solved poverty, you see, so there's no point in even pretending that the poor are anything more than grist for our pet theories, and ammunition for our pet arguments, and wealthy reporters can ask even wealthier alleged men of god about the whole business, and then tut-tut about dependency and The Deficit. If Rick Warren had hustled into the Temple on that Passover long ago, he'd have taken his tithe from the moneychangers and bought himself the best steak in Galilee. The poor, it appears, we will have with us always. We just choose not to notice them, is all.