

Work and Human Dignity

It was the power of work that we Republicans insisted on when welfare reform legislation was finally passed in 1996. AFDC was scrapped and replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Recipients were required to work or participate in work-related activities. For the first time, welfare was time limited: no more able-bodied welfare lifers.

Liberals howled. The Urban Institute released a study predicting that the bill would cause 2.6 million persons to fall below the poverty line, and that 1.1 million of those impoverished would be children. There were no jobs for these people, Democrats screamed. But the liberal critics miscalculated a bit.

Yes, welfare reform moved millions off welfare. The rolls have been more than cut in half. But what made this legislation a groundbreaking success was that it moved *parents* off the welfare rolls and into *work*. This reform sparked one of the greatest increases in employment of low-skill workers in United States history. “The Census Bureau shows unequivocally that, in terms of employment, one of the biggest demographic changes and most rapid ever in the history of the United States for any group, is this huge increase in employment by these low-income, poor

mothers. And the biggest impact was on never-married mothers,” Ron Haskins notes.

There are about one and one-half million mothers who used to be on welfare who are now working. They are working because we required them to work and then thanks to the work incentives we enacted (expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, childcare and transportation funding, job training and counseling), low-skill, low-wage mothers were financially better off working than being on welfare. It was almost that simple. And once they got off the dependency treadmill and into the workplace, we made sure the support was there to make work *work* for them.

Research has shown that in every state in the union, a mother working half time at minimum wage is still better off than if she were on welfare. And these women aren't making minimum wage (\$5.15 per hour). They are averaging somewhere around \$8 per hour.

If you look at the income data for single-mother-headed families starting in about 1993, it looks like a big “X.” Income from food stamps, housing assistance, and welfare payments is a diagonal line heading down. Income from wages and earnings, plus the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), is a diagonal line heading up. And overall, these families are better off in constant dollars by 20 to 25 percent.

The village elders in Congress, who refuse to accept that they were wrong, always dismiss this success story by crediting the booming economy of the late 1990s: in their minds it was all a historical fluke. Wrong again. If the success of welfare reform was due to the roaring economy of the 1990s, then we should have seen welfare caseloads going down after the recession ended in 1991, before we enacted welfare reform. But the caseload had in fact exploded, increasing every year from 1989

to 1993 (from 3.77 to 4.98 million people), even when the economy rebounded. It began to decline in 1994 mostly because of welfare reform efforts undertaken by the states. We also should have seen caseloads rising again during the recent recession, which began in March 2001. While the caseload did rise slightly during the fall of 2001, by April 2002 the number of families was still lower than the previous April by 34,698.

Furthermore, groundbreaking research by June E. O'Neill (the Democratic former director of the Congressional Budget Office) and M. Anne Hill shows that half or more of the drop in welfare rolls after 1996 was due to the policy changes made by welfare reform. Less than a fifth was due to the overall economy.

But for some liberals that's *still* not enough. They cannot accept that having people get up each day and work is good and changes lives. They claim that all we are doing is putting people in dead-end jobs. Their doctrine of No-Fault Freedom leads them to believe that a person can't truly be free if she is in a job that is "going nowhere." Never mind the traditional view that all work is ennobling if done well, or that an individual can only perform the jobs for which she has the necessary skills. According to liberals, every person deserves a "living wage" regardless of her contribution to a given enterprise.

Prior to 1996, the village elders asked the American people to pay for programs that fed, housed, clothed, and provided free medical care to mothers who were not working. Now these proponents of No-Fault Freedom believe that taxpayers should pay for four years of college for those who cannot get "good" jobs, even as most American working parents struggle to put their kids through college. I am all for providing women on welfare with basic training so that they can take entry-level jobs, but beyond that I believe that they should provide for their education under the same circumstances as everyone else—through

a combination of financial aid, loans, savings, hard work, and sacrifice. In other words, they must earn it.

Liberals, on the other hand, want to amend the welfare reform law so that tax dollars can be used to pay for the tuition of welfare recipients who want to go to college for four years. And not only do they want to pay for college for people on welfare, they also want to count going to college as a work-related activity.

But the notion that college education is a cost-effective way to help poor, low-skill, unmarried mothers with high school diplomas or GEDs move up the economic ladder is just wrong: both according to common sense, and according to social science research.

When we pushed the welfare reform law through in 1996 we were purposefully heavy on work and light on education. That's because education and training programs have not been shown to lead to job advancement for mothers on welfare. Data show that welfare recipients who are put in jobs see their earnings increase twice as fast over five years as welfare recipients who are put in education programs before going into work. For low-skill jobs, employers want people who have proven they can show up for work on time, work a full day, handle real-life work experiences, and deal with a boss and fellow employees. Remember when you were looking for that first job, and all your prospective employers wanted someone with experience instead? As a result of TANF, welfare clients are getting the experience and know-how employers want. Job experience is the key to future advancement and opportunity.

Not only did welfare reform improve the economic lot of welfare recipients—which of course helped keep families together, contrary to liberal predictions—it strengthened families in other ways as well.

For example, after a steady decline for many years, since

1996 the number of African-American families headed by a married mother and father has *increased* by about 520,000. In 1994, the year states began reforming welfare, the birth rate of unmarried teenage girls peaked at 45.8 children born per 1,000 girls. The rate has dropped every year since, and in 2001 it stood at 37 per 1,000. For white teenage girls there was a drop from 35.8 in 1994 to 31.3 per 1,000 in 2001.

For black unmarried teenagers the drop was dramatic, from 99.3 per 1,000 in 1994 to 69.9 in 2001. In addition, the percentage of out-of-wedlock births among all blacks dropped between 1995 and 2000 for the first time since the early 1950s. Changing expectations for young girls from poor homes from dependency to hard work and a five-year time-limit on benefits changed behavior for the better.

Statistics are telling, but nothing tells the story like the young mother who spoke to me at a hearing on the progress we had made with welfare reform. She recounted that when she got her first paycheck, her children were unusually excited to go to the store. When she asked them why, they said that they couldn't wait to go to the checkout line and not feel shame as people stared at them for using their food stamps. Self-respect is being restored.

Another young man told me that he had gained renewed admiration for his mother for holding it all together—her job, their house, and her children. He never thought she could do it. Respect for others is being restored.

Finally, there is Billy Jo Morton. When I was sworn into the Senate in 1995, I decided that since I was going to take an active role in reforming welfare I had better see how it works firsthand. So I immediately hired five people on welfare, about 10 percent of my staff, to work in my Pennsylvania offices. Billy Jo worked for me in her first job off welfare in my Harrisburg office. She

told me that until she was forced to move off the rolls she thought she was stuck with two kids at home and no chance for a better life. Billy Jo was a great employee. After a while, we provided her a flexible enough schedule that she could go to community college to pick up some college credits part-time. There were some bumps along the way, but after a few years she moved on to something better. She was offered a scholarship to finish her degree, which she did, in education. She is now working as a teacher. Hope is being restored.

This is what happens when you have enough faith in everybody to rise to take responsibility for their lives and to make the right choices. With welfare reform, the government stopped enabling destructive behavior. We changed the paradigm for unmarried women: having children no longer means life-long government support, but rather (as it should) work and sacrifice.

Recall for a minute those poverty figures I mentioned earlier: they changed too, but not in the way the Urban Institute or Rep. Charles Rangel predicted. Congressman Rangel had said our bill “will devastate programs for the poorest among us, especially our children,” and that it was “a moral outrage and an affront to the basic tenets of every religion. . . . The bill is the most radical and mean-spirited attack against the poor that I [have] witnessed.” Now the percentage of all American children living in poverty was, at the time of his statement (1995), 20.8 percent. By 2001, it had dropped to 16.3 percent. For black children, the figure was 41.9 percent in 1995. In 2002 it stood at 30.2 percent, the lowest figure ever recorded.

It’s worth dwelling on this last fact. This conservative approach, which thinks in terms of families instead of mere individuals and puts work and responsibility first—this approach that was and still is condemned by every national liberal organization that purports to represent the interest of blacks—

lowered black poverty among children to its lowest level ever. Is the national leadership of the NAACP paying attention? Many of these national leaders, unlike many of their members, may see but not believe because they are liberals first, Democrats second, and advocates for African-Americans only because it gives them cachet with other liberals and Democrats.

There's only one conclusion to draw from all this. Before 1996 welfare was a mammoth federal income-transfer program that, while it was certainly not designed to do so, acted as a huge barrier between low-income families and the U.S. economy. Our economy had the jobs for unmarried women on welfare. The problem was, the liberal welfare programs neither encouraged nor required poor mothers to get anywhere near those jobs—until we pushed through welfare reform.

I GAVE YOU A FEW anecdotes earlier, but this story will give you a better understanding of what has happened since 1996. It is the story of Michelle Turner.

Michelle came to work for us in 1996 as a staff assistant in Philadelphia. Prior to that, she had been on and off welfare for about five years. She had left home as a teenager, mostly because she never got along with her father. She ended up living with a man who would be the father of her first two children, both girls.

“He never actually hit me,” she says today. “But he put his hands on me. He'd grab me, threaten me. There was shoving, name-calling, verbal abuse. He was cheating, doing the whole thing. I remember sitting on the bed one day in the afternoon. I knew he would be home from work in about 15 minutes. And my hand started visibly shaking because the stress was so bad. When I saw that, I packed up my two daughters and left.”

Michelle ended up in a Philadelphia shelter for recovering substance abusers—something she wasn't, but it was the only place she could go. "I decided to stay there until I could afford my own place. As a means of getting out of the building and off welfare, I took a class at Drexel University in automated office training, and then fixed up my résumé, which wasn't too hard because I had some college.

"I just had to get off welfare. The people at the welfare office who would give you the check, their attitude was that it was their money. They would talk to you in such a demeaning manner. Plus, it wasn't enough to live on.

"So I ended up getting an internship at the People's Emergency Center, a domestic abuse shelter, as part of their welfare-to-work program."

From there, Michelle took a job as a staff assistant in my office—in her words, she became "a glorified receptionist." Soon, she became a caseworker and eventually she became our Director of Constituent Services. She's been married since the spring of 2000, giving birth to a third daughter. In 2003, after nine years, she left our office to take a job at Drexel, where she is the administrative assistant for a surgeon. She and her husband just bought a new house.

When asked how her life would have been different if she had stayed on welfare instead of getting a job, she quickly answers, "I would probably be married, but I probably would have repeated what I had found myself falling into—an abusive relationship. I never would have ended up working in a Senate office, and never would have had the confidence to get a good husband and buy a house. I would have ended up in some dead end."

The power of work, and people who believed in her, gave Michelle Turner the break she needed. She did the rest herself.