

“Needy Families” and “Welfare Cheats”: The Rhetoric of Family Values in the 1961-1962 Welfare Reform Debates



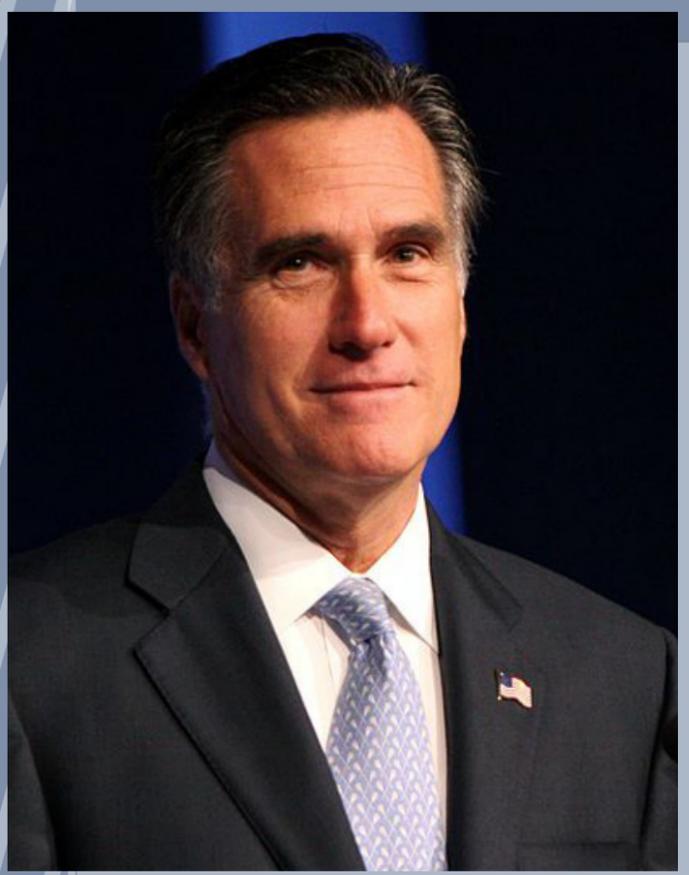
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The Romney presidential campaign found itself in the midst of controversy in September 2012 after the release of a video in which the Republican presidential candidate criticized the values and ideals of the “47% of the people who,” Romney argued, “will vote for the president no matter what.”¹ Romney stated:

All right, there are 47% who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That [sic] that’s an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. . . . my job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.²

Romney’s comments fueled the contemporary debate about welfare programs, personal responsibility, and the government’s involvement in family life. However, the roots of the issues he raised and the negative images that he invoked of men and women “dependent upon government” for the care and support of themselves and their families date back to at least the early 1960s when federal and state officials proposed new policies designed to reduce the number of impoverished families. This essay analyzes the rhetoric surrounding three key welfare reform policies—the 1961 Aid to Dependent Children—Unemployed Parents (ADC-UP) program, the so-called “Newburgh [New York] Plan,” and the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*—in an effort to reveal the historical precedents for the contemporary welfare debates and to illustrate the ways in which policymakers have invoked “family values” language and images in public policy discussions.

The study of the “rhetoric of family values” is relatively new in the field of rhetoric. Dana Cloud provided the first thorough exploration with her analysis of the 1992 presidential election campaign rhetoric. Cloud argued that “the family” is an ideograph, which Michael Calvin McGee defined as a “high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.”³ Cloud explained that, like other ideographs, “the family” is persuasive because it is “abstract, easily recognized” and evokes “near-universal and rapid identification within a culture.” Cloud’s analysis of the “family values” rhetoric in the 1992 presidential campaign began to suggest why the family ideograph provokes such passion in political debates, and it laid the foundation for additional studies of how “the family” has functioned as a powerful rhetorical tool.

Other scholars have built on Cloud’s work and explored how politicians have invoked family values language and images in particular public policy contexts. Robert Asen, for instance, has examined images of “the family” in welfare debates during the twentieth century.⁴ He found that during the early 1900s, policymakers portrayed female-headed homes positively, suggesting that they were deserving of public support. By the 1960s and 1970s, however, these



images had changed to negative portrayals of allegedly undeserving, welfare-dependent mothers. Lisa Gring-Pemble has illuminated how more recent politicians have used negative portraits of single mothers to justify dramatic changes in U.S. welfare policy. In her analysis of the hearings and debates over the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996*, she found that policymakers held up a “classic normal family” as the family ideal and offered it as justification for a responsibility-based approach to the welfare reform legislation.⁵ Asen’s and Gring-Pemble’s findings not only illustrate the important role that family values rhetoric has played in historic policy debates, they emphasize the need for additional explorations of how “the family” functions to shape political discussions.



This study aims to further our understanding of the rhetoric of family values and images by analyzing the ways in which liberal and conservative policy makers have invoked the rhetoric of family values during debates over three additional welfare reform policy proposals: the 1961 Aid to Dependent Children—Unemployed Parents (ADC-UP) program, the Kennedy administration’s initiative to temporarily expand federal public assistance benefits to children in two-parent homes where both parents were unemployed; the so-called “Newburgh Plan,” one small New York city’s plan to reduce welfare costs and minimize the number of families on the city’s welfare roll; and the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*, the Kennedy administration’s proposals to extend the ADC-UP program, expand welfare coverage, and increase funding for rehabilitative services.



<http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/WhatWeDo/History/ThisWeek/ucm117831.htm>

During the 1961 debates over the ADC-UP program, the Kennedy administration benefited from the widespread belief that the intended recipients were needy children who came from hard-working, morally righteous families. In the months following ADC-UP’s passage, the supporters of the Newburgh Plan helped justify the plan’s controversial measures to cut welfare costs and reduce the welfare rolls by portraying the bill’s intended recipients as cheats, chiselers, and social parasites. The Kennedy administration and other proponents of increased welfare programs tried to win bipartisan support for the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962* by portraying dependent families as “fixable” deviants and thereby casting public assistance as a good investment in America’s future. Although the participants offered competing depictions of welfare families, both liberals and conservatives contributed to a negative image of impoverished single-parent families as morally deficient and socially undesirable. In the process, they laid the foundation for more intrusive governmental intervention in family life in the future.

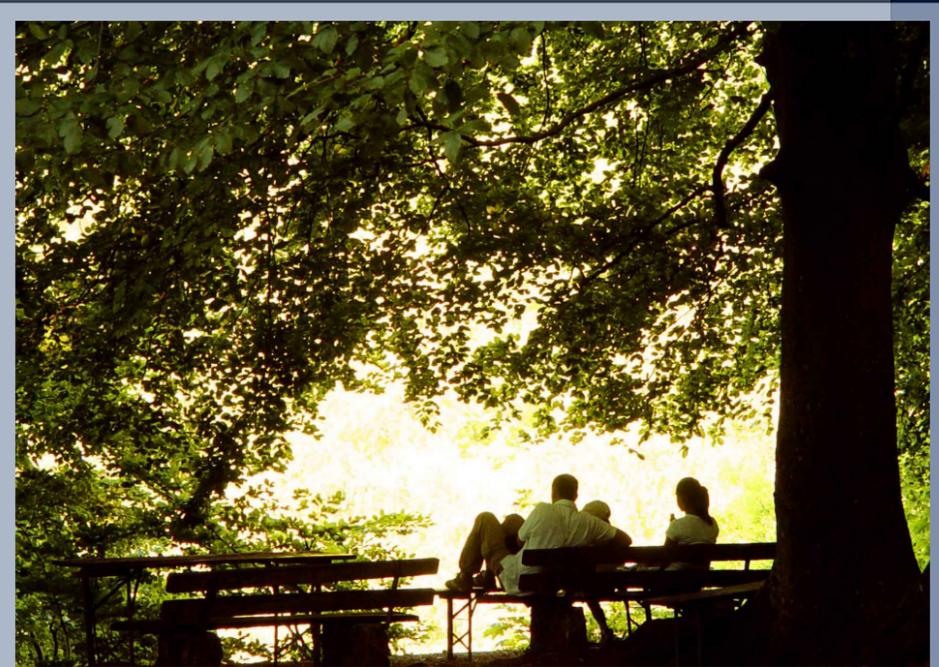
Helping Those Who Are Poor Through “No Fault of Their Own”: The Rhetoric of Compassion in the Debates over the 1961 Aid to Dependent Children—Unemployed Parents (ADC-UP) Program



President John F. Kennedy’s election paved the way for the enormous growth of the welfare state in the 1960s. Prior to entering office, the president-elect had established a Task Force on Health and Social Security to review past welfare reform initiatives and identify the “most immediate necessities for Federal action.”⁶ The Task Force, chaired by New Deal architect Wilbur Cohen, made three recommendations. It called upon the administration to propose an amendment to the federal Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program to temporarily extend coverage to needy children of unemployed parents. It advised the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to submit to the President and Congress a more long-range “family and child welfare services plan” addressing the problems of needy persons not covered under the *Social Security Act of 1935*. It also called for a reorganization of the Department of HEW to ensure that the needs of children and families remained at the “top level of policy decision.”⁷ By implementing these three changes, the Task Force maintained, the administration would overcome some of the “most glaring” deficiencies in the existing public welfare system and alleviate some of the economic hardships poor families faced.⁸

The Kennedy administration acted on the Task Force’s first recommendation shortly after taking office. In January 1961, HEW proposed a temporary extension of the federal ADC program to include children of unemployed parents. Under the original ADC program, states could apply for federal grants to assist in the care of dependent children deprived of parental support because of death, desertion, or disability. The new Aid to Dependent Children—Unemployed Parents program (ADC-UP) would allow states to apply for additional funds to assist children of unemployed parents who had exhausted their unemployment benefits or whose benefits were not enough to support their family. By providing short-term financial support to families struggling because of unemployment, supporters of the change reasoned that the federal government could help strengthen families and prevent long-term governmental dependency.

Although the program was temporary and the number of families who would be eligible was small, the ADC-UP program raised significant questions about the federal government’s role in two-parent family life. Social policy scholars Alfred J. Kahn and Sheila B. Kamerman explained that Americans historically have resisted programs for “healthy” families out of concern that programs for families “not in trouble” would “ensure dependence.”⁹ The ADC-UP program, by offering federal



public aid to unemployed yet otherwise “healthy” two-parent families, set a new precedent that some opponents complained would lead to the federal government’s intervention in a wide range of family affairs.

Proponents of the ADC-UP program, however, justified the changes with a rhetoric of compassion. The proponents described the economic hardships unemployed families with children faced, drew attention to the ways in which the existing public welfare system supposedly failed to respond to those hardships, and appealed to Congress to acknowledge the federal government’s responsibility to help *all* needy children. In other words, they presented a sympathetic portrayal of the victims of unemployment, arguing that the families that would benefit from the ADC-UP program were headed by “honest, hard-working fathers,”¹⁰ “willing jobseekers,” or parents with “a substantial record of employment in the last two years.”¹¹ These families were suffering as a “result of forces not within their own control,” according to proponents of the bill, and they remained committed to being self-sufficient and turned to public assistance only as a “last resort.”¹² The proponents also highlighted the families’ commitment to family stability, noting that despite their economic hardships, they “still ha[d] pride,” or that they “still want[ed] to make a go of it,” and “keep their families together.”¹³ The proponents acknowledged that some fathers, out of desperation, had “resorted to real or pretended desertion to qualify their children for help.”¹⁴ But that was only because the current law encouraged them to do so. The majority of parents remained at home, “prevented by conscience and love of



family” from abandoning their children.¹⁵ All in all, proponents concluded, the families that would benefit from the legislation were good families with strong family values.



Thus, proponents of the ADC-UP program argued that those who would benefit from the legislation were “worthy” recipients. They were hardworking families whose poverty was the result of failed economic policies, not personal or moral failures. The fathers were committed to finding work, and they were hesitant to ask for assistance in the first place. They were therefore not likely to become lazy or dependent on the government because they received temporary aid. Moreover, proponents of the legislation argued that the status quo actually encouraged fathers to leave their children. The ADC system was “not the basic cause of family breakup,”¹⁶ but the program’s eligibility requirements placed a “premium

on broken families” and provided “incentives for fathers to abandon their children so that they may be fed.”¹⁷ John Tramburg of the American Public Welfare Association highlighted the need to maintain the integrity of the two-parent family above all else. He stated: “It seems to me that the backbone of America lies with a strong, moral, decent, honorable family. And when we lose these families, we have to go about trying to restore them.”¹⁸ Appealing to American’s concerns about the growing number of single-parent homes, the proponents invoked images of the two-parent family ideal to convince Congress of the need for reform.

Despite opponents' continued concerns that the new legislation would encourage still more dependency and invite further governmental intervention in family life, the bill extending ADC benefits to unemployed families passed quickly and quietly through Congress. Both the House and the Senate passed the legislation on voice votes and, on May 8, 1961, President Kennedy signed the legislation into law. Under this new law (Pub. L. 87-31), the federal government (1) made grants available to states wishing to extend their programs of aid to dependent children to include children deprived of parental support or care because of their parent's unemployment; (2) broadened the term "dependent child" to include needy children who had been removed from their homes by a court order; and (3) for a period of two years, temporarily increased from 80% to 100% the federal government's share of the costs of training public welfare personnel.¹⁹ The legislation did not radically or permanently change U.S. social welfare policies, but it did mark an important milestone in U.S. family policy because it established a new relationship between the federal government and impoverished unemployed two-parent homes and began to revise understandings of families worthy or deserving of governmental aid.



Rewarding "Deserving" Families

The federal government historically has offered tax breaks and other incentives to promote strong families.²⁰ In declaring that the federal government had a responsibility to provide aid to otherwise stable and "healthy" families suffering from unemployment, proponents of the ADC-UP program took that obligation one step further. Historian James T. Patterson has maintained that, by making two-parent homes eligible for federal public assistance, the ADC-UP program marked a "liberal step forward in the evolution" of federal welfare.²¹ At the



same time, however, the ADC-UP program rested upon some of the same, "traditional" family values that had been the foundation of social welfare policy in America. With the white, two-parent, church-going family still in the backdrop as the unspoken ideal, proponents of the ADC-UP legislation said little about heads of household that might be female or African American. They argued that children in two-parent homes were "just as needy"²² as their ADC counterparts, and they argued that there was "no reason" why the child of an unemployed father "should

not be fed as well as a child in other unfortunate circumstances.”²³ But they did not equate the children of the unemployed with those of single-parent families. To the contrary, they seemed to imply that ADC-UP families were somehow more deserving or moral than families supported under the existing ADC program, and they declared it wrong that these “deserving” families might go hungry while less deserving families received government aid.

These arguments, in turn, had racial implications as well, although few involved in the debate explicitly addressed those implications. At the time of the hearing over the ADC-UP legislation, the Civil Rights Movement was drawing national attention to discriminatory employment practices that doomed many African Americans to poverty and the prejudicial ADC policies that allowed states to prevent many impoverished African American families from receiving public assistance.²⁴ Although the legislation technically stood to help some African Americans—at least those who conformed to the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideal of a two-parent family—the supporters said little about race or the need to eliminate these discriminatory practices. Historian and feminist scholar Jennifer Mittelstadt has suggested that liberal reformers in the late 1950s and 1960s often tried to hide the connection between race and welfare as a way to portray the ADC program more favorably.²⁵ While this may have been a strategy intended to bring about the ADC-UP program’s quick passage, it handicapped the Civil Rights advocates’ efforts to ensure that eligible single- and two-parent African American families received ADC and ADC-UP benefits.

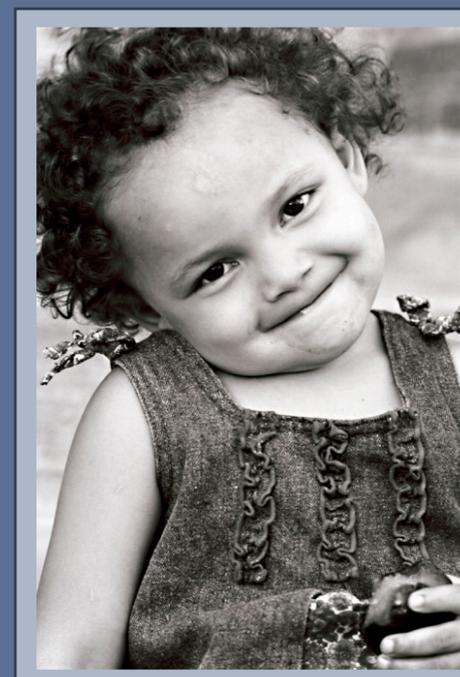
Rejecting Those Who Can Help Themselves: The Rhetoric of Condemnation in the 1961 Newburgh Plan

Once it won passage of the temporary extension of welfare benefits to the families of the unemployed, the Kennedy administration began its “intensive study of the problems and prospects for public assistance in the next decade.”²⁶ In May 1961, HEW Secretary Abraham Ribicoff appointed twenty-five leaders in the social work field to an Ad Hoc Committee on Public Welfare and charged them with making recommendations for legislation that would provide counseling, job training, and other professional services to the nation’s social welfare recipients. He asked George K. Wyman, a former Deputy Commissioner of Social Security, to propose administrative changes in the Children’s Bureau and the Bureau of Public Assistance, which oversaw many of the federal government’s social welfare programs. He also appealed to social welfare professionals and organizations such as the National Social Welfare Assembly and the American Public Welfare Association to help the administration in its efforts to better understand and prevent welfare dependency. The results of these inquiries, Ribicoff explained, would form “the core of our basic proposals in the months and the years to come.”²⁷

Just as the Kennedy administration began its study of the welfare system, however, a national debate erupted over the results of a seven-month study of welfare programs in Newburgh, New York. Charged with finding explanations for a dramatic rise in welfare costs, a committee of three citizens in Newburgh, appointed by City



<http://www.pongoresume.com/blogPosts/533/how-far-would-you-go-to-land-a-job-.cfm>



Manager Joseph McDowell Mitchell, identified four major factors behind the spiraling costs. It claimed that the “arbitrary dictates of the State and Federal Departments of Welfare” had usurped local control over the programs and driven up costs. It blamed a “mass migration of untrained, uneducated persons . . . lacking in moral standards with no civic pride” for overburdening the city’s relief rolls. The committee condemned “unscrupulous landlords” who took advantage of the poor and overcharged them for substandard dwellings, in effect padding their own pocketbooks at the taxpayers’ expense. It also blamed the “general apathy” of the community and emphasized the need for citizens to get involved with welfare issues. Without vigorous action to address these four problems, the committee concluded, the city could “do very little to correct the situation.”²⁸

In response to this report, Newburgh City Manager Mitchell drafted a welfare reform plan designed to eliminate fraud, maintain fiscal responsibility, and promote morality and a work ethic among welfare recipients in the city. Whereas the ADC-UP bill was designed to expand federal assistance to temporarily unemployed but morally upright families, the Newburgh plan was designed to eliminate from the welfare rolls those families the city deemed unworthy of aid. For instance, the plan advised all “mothers of illegitimate children” that if they had any additional children out of wedlock “they shall be denied relief.” The city refused to provide support to—and even threatened to remove children from—needy single-parent families where the “home environment” was “not satisfactory.” The plan denied relief to all recipients “physically capable of and available for employment” who refused a job offer, as well as to newcomers to the city who arrived without having secured employment.²⁹ The Newburgh city council’s 13-point plan created an unflattering portrait of those on public assistance, characterizing their plight as personal and moral failures and setting stricter rules for getting aid.



The Newburgh Plan clearly violated the humanitarian spirit of the *Social Security Act of 1935* and challenged the assumption that all needy families were “deserving” of aid. In the city officials’ public statements, they talked about the plan not with a rhetoric of compassion, but rather a rhetoric of condemnation. City Manager Mitchell, the spokesman for the plan, and the other proponents drew attention to the alleged abuses within the welfare system, argued that the current state and federal laws inhibited the city’s efforts to curb those abuses, and declared that Newburgh’s tax-payers had a right to determine which citizens deserved aid.³⁰ Portraying welfare recipients as cheats, chiselers, and social parasites, Newburgh city officials helped create a new and unsympathetic portrait of welfare recipients.



The Newburgh Plan targeted two types of “unworthy” families that, its proponents claimed, should be removed from the public assistance rolls. The plan targeted single-parent families headed by unwed, allegedly promiscuous mothers who, according to the plan’s supporters, lacked the proper family values needed to provide a “suitable home” for their children. Although these women were capable of gainful employment or may have had stable relationships with able-bodied males, they supposedly rejected marriage, preferring instead to “breed



illegitimate children at the taxpayers' expense."³¹ The plan also targeted families headed by idle fathers who migrated to the city "for the purpose of becoming or continuing as public charges."³² Like the unwed mothers, these idle fathers, according to supporters of the Newburgh plan, were content with "squat[ing] on the relief rolls forever" and making "more on relief than when working." They too lacked proper family values, preferring to use welfare funds for the "purchase of whiskey, automobiles and other indulgences." The plan's proponents pointed to Newburgh's increased rates of illegitimacy, crime, and violence, particularly in the "[w]elfare wards," as evidence of the harm that these "social parasites" were causing to the city.³³

These negative depictions of the plan's intended targets helped provide justification for denying the families benefits. Proponents of the Newburgh plan argued that the families' lack of proper values made them undeserving of aid. They were not worthy or moral mothers and fathers who deserved the city's compassion. Nor were they otherwise sound families struggling with unemployment because of a lack of job opportunities. Instead, they were deviants and parasites who preferred to loaf and live off their

neighbors. The depictions also served as a response to critics who described the bill as "inhumane."³⁴ Unlike those poor who could not survive without the public's support, the advocates argued, these families were capable of supporting themselves. By eliminating these unworthy families from the rolls, advocates of the plan explained, the city would have more funds available to support those who were true victims of circumstances and incapable of helping themselves.

Proponents of the Newburgh plan claimed to support welfare for those in need. City Manager Mitchell explained that the city's goal was simply to make the best use of the city's limited funds "to safeguard the life and security of the indigent, of the destitute, the disabled, the aged, handicapped, and other socially maladjusted citizens."³⁵ Newburgh had compassion toward those with real need, he suggested, but they also had a responsibility to the broader community. Mitchell concluded that the government "must benefit the people, and its total effect must benefit the people as a whole."³⁶ And that was an argument that apparently appealed to those Americans who expressed concern about the growing costs and supposed abuses within the welfare system.

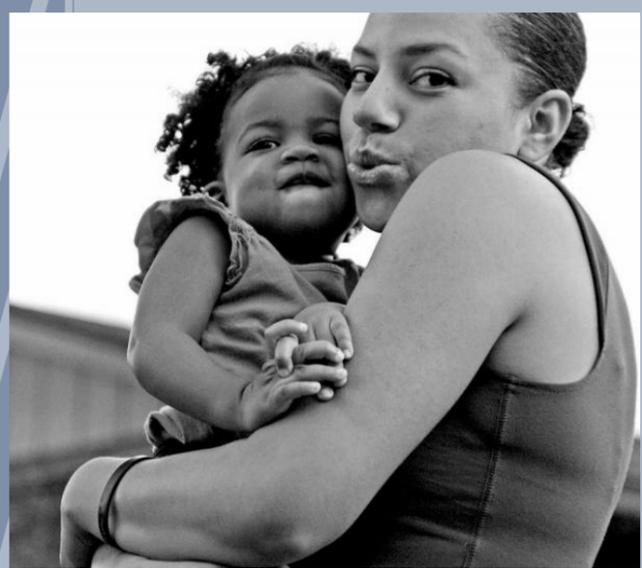
Although the New York Supreme Court eventually overturned all but one of the provisions of Newburgh's "get tough" policy, the Newburgh plan nevertheless succeeded in calling attention to the alleged problems in the nation's welfare system and inspiring debate over the basic assumption that all poor people were "worthy" of aid.³⁷ Commenting on "Newburgh's Lessons for the Nation," in a New York Times article, A. H. Raskin noted: "In every major city and state,



questions have been raised about the extent to which abuses have crept into the relief administration, about whether enough is being done to discourage habitual dependency, and about the possibility of reorganization to guarantee that communities receive maximum social good for their welfare dollar.”³⁸ Similarly, a July 28, 1961, *Time Magazine* article credited Newburgh city officials with giving the nation “cause for some sober second thoughts on the use—and misuse—of civil charity.”³⁹ Despite the court decision, Newburgh city officials declared their plan a success. During a November 20, 1961, speech to the Detroit Economic Club, City Manager Mitchell declared that, despite a court injunction, the city “still succeeded” in reducing its welfare costs and in challenging the entire “philosophy of welfare.”⁴⁰

Racializing the Welfare Debate

Barely beneath the surface of the debate over the Newburgh plan were concerns with a new underclass of African American welfare recipients. Although Newburgh city officials denied that their plan was racially motivated, their own public statements reveal that many of the rules were targeted at the African American



seasonal migrant workers who had begun to settle in the area year-round.⁴¹ In a *Reporter Magazine* (New York), article in August of 1961, Meg Greenfield quoted City Councilman George McKneally as stating: “This is not a racial issue.” He then added: “But there’s hardly an incentive to a naturally lazy people to work if they can exist without working.”⁴² In a March 1961 speech, City Manager Joe Mitchell complained that the city’s principles of welfare were being violated “by this horde of incoming humanity . . . of this never-ending pilgrimage from North Carolina to New York.”⁴³ In another speech taped for distribution, Mitchell explained that the city’s welfare plan was “partly intended to stop the migration of a parasitic element into the city.”⁴⁴ For more than six months, media outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune* had picked up on city officials’ references to Newburgh’s seasonal workers and publicized their

claims that these “parasites” were contributing to the rising welfare costs and creating new social problems in the city.⁴⁵ Although the State Welfare Board provided evidence that the city’s statistics and claims were grossly exaggerated, the responses did little to alter such racialized perceptions. Historian Lisa Levenstein argued that the Newburgh controversy “cemented the new association of public assistance with African Americans in the North and crystallized a discourse identifying welfare as the cause, not the consequence, of urban poverty, joblessness, and illegitimacy.”⁴⁶

Thus, the Newburgh controversy marked an important moment in the history of the welfare debates. Although Newburgh officials claimed that they were as concerned about the needy as anybody, they began a process of demonizing certain classes of recipients—most notably, single mothers and “idle” fathers—who they argued, in effect, were taking away aid from more “deserving” recipients. Lost in the debate at that point, of course, were the nation’s most vulnerable citizens, the children of those “undeserving” recipients targeted by Newburgh’s plan. At first, the Kennedy administration remained largely silent about the Newburgh controversy, but in December of 1961 HEW Secretary Abraham Ribicoff ordered state welfare agencies to adopt new measures to curb abuses



in the welfare system and to better safeguard the interests of children deserted or insufficiently cared for by their parents.⁴⁷ Although Ribicoff denied that the Newburgh Plan inspired any of these new directives, it seems clear that the debate over the controversial plan did have an effect. And that effect would become even clearer in the debates over the public welfare amendments proposed by the Kennedy administration in 1962.

Helping Those Who Help Themselves: The Rhetoric of Rehabilitation in the Debates over the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*

In September 1961, the Kennedy administration's Ad Hoc Committee on Public Welfare submitted its list of recommendations to the president. The list included extending the temporary Aid to Dependent Children-Unemployed Parents (ADC-UP) program, providing federal support for day care, allocating federal funds for training welfare personnel, and implementing new preventative services designed to maintain family stability in two-parent homes. The list also included rehabilitative services designed to help impoverished families become more self-supporting. The Kennedy administration acted on the committee's recommendations by implementing immediate administrative changes and by proposing the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*. The bill aimed to "extend and improve the public assistance and child welfare services programs of the *Social Security Act*" and, like the original *Social Security Act*, it included a variety of measures to combat poverty.⁴⁸ Rather than cash assistance or "welfare" in the traditional sense, the 1962 amendments emphasized the need for rehabilitative and preventative services for those living in poverty.⁴⁹

As the debates over the 1961 ADC-UP bill and the Newburgh Plan suggest, both conservatives and liberals had come to see the social welfare policies of the federal government as a serious problem.⁵⁰ Almost all agreed

that the government had some responsibility to care for its most vulnerable citizens. They disagreed about the most effective means of achieving that goal, however, and about the forms and levels of assistance that the government should provide. If the proponents of the 1962 public welfare amendments were going to convince Congress to support increasing the welfare budget and expanding programs, they needed to address the concerns of both liberals and conservatives. In the congressional testimony offered in support of the bill, the proponents' did this by combining a rhetoric of compassion and a rhetoric of condemnation into what might be described as a rhetoric of rehabilitation. Portraying welfare families as "fixable" deviants, they effectively appeased critics of the existing welfare system on both the left and the right.



Just as they had during the ADC-UP debates, proponents of the 1962 amendments offered a sympathetic portrait of the typical welfare family. Whereas previous generations of welfare recipients had suffered from economic hardship alone, many of these “casualties of progress” had suffered because of larger economic and social trends that had made them “victims of dependency.”⁵¹ Through no fault of their own, these recipients needed help because of a “lack of education,” the disappearance of low-skilled jobs because of “scientific improvements of our time,” a lack of available job training, or a “health or accident problem.” In other words, they had lost their “ability to work” because of forces beyond their control.⁵² Others had suffered from discrimination or family breakdown.⁵³ Emphasizing that many of these families were simply “unaware of ways to help themselves,” the reformers appealed to Congress to help these families develop the tools they needed to become more self-sufficient.⁵⁴



Unlike proponents of the Newburgh Plan, supporters of the 1962 welfare reform amendments thus characterized welfare families as “innocent victims”⁵⁵ of changing times. These “victims” preferred work to a relief check, and they wanted to become self-sufficient. They simply lacked the skills and knowledge needed to achieve those goals. Articulating a theme that would become common in later welfare debates, HEW Secretary Abraham Ribicoff warned of an “endless cycle” of welfare dependency in which the children of welfare recipients would “repeat the problems their own parents faced” unless they got help.⁵⁶ Simultaneously appealing to policymakers’ sympathy for the poor and fears of that “cycle” of poverty spiraling out of control, Ribicoff and other advocates of welfare reform bolstered their call for dramatic change in the ADC program.



<http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/WhatWeDo/History/ThisWeek/ucm117831.htm>

In advocating a new approach, proponents of the welfare amendments of 1962 rejected the “get tough” policies of the Newburgh Plan. Such an approach, they argued, was both morally wrong *and* ineffective. In a speech before Congress on February 2, 1962, President Kennedy himself denounced communities that had “attempted to save money through ruthless and arbitrary cutbacks” and declared such efforts a failure.⁵⁷ Despite those attempts to address the causes of

welfare dependency, Kennedy argued, the “root problems remained.” As an alternative, administration spokesmen and other supporters of the 1962 amendments offered evidence of the effectiveness of a more rehabilitative approach. In his testimony before the House Committee on Ways and Means, for example, HEW Secretary Ribicoff offered several stories about “reformed” women who learned the life and work skills they needed to leave the welfare rolls.⁵⁸ Similarly, a variety of social workers and city officials testified before Congress that rehabilitation of welfare recipients was more cost-efficient than simply providing cash assistance, describing such an approach as a “good investment” that eventually would “save money for the public welfare program itself.”⁵⁹



Thus, for advocates of the administration's welfare reform measures, the debate over the 1962 amendments was not just about compassion for the poor and providing cash assistance. Yet neither was it about finding and expelling welfare "cheats" from the welfare rolls. Rather, they took a middle ground, diagnosing the causes of welfare dependency as a combination of social and economic changes and prescribing a more "rehabilitative" approach. In the process, however, they glossed over some of the most troubling issues in the welfare debate.

Rehabilitating the Poor

Social Welfare historians point to the passage of the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962* as a defining moment in the contemporary family policy debates. While the bill expanded benefits and services for low-income families, it won passage because of arguments that described welfare recipients as victims or even deficient and advocated their rehabilitation. Rhetoric scholar Dana Cloud has explored some of the implications of such an attitude in her discussion of "therapeutic" discourses. According to Cloud, therapeutic rhetoric "refers to a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy's lexicon—the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing order—but in contexts of sociopolitical conflict."⁶⁰ Cloud explains that this discourse developed during the 18th and 19th centuries as a means by which politicians, employers, and others in power could persuade oppressed classes that individuals—rather than social or economic systems—were responsible for their social and economic plight. In doing so, Cloud explains that politicians and others in power could offer therapeutic rhetoric as a substitute for change in the structural systems that contributed to racism, poverty, and oppression. The participants in the 1962 debates—who employed this rhetoric with its emphasis on the therapeutic need for rehabilitation, professional services, and individual improvement—thus suggested that impoverished families were both at fault for their own misfortune and responsible for their own recovery. Although the government was willing to provide some assistance for rehabilitation services, it was ultimately up to the families to break their own cycle of poverty by embracing the "therapeutic values" of "individualism, familism, self-help, and self-absorption."⁶¹



http://www.web-betty-blog.com/wordless/poverty_america.jpg

The lack of attention to race-based inequalities in the debate over the 1962 amendments also had longer-term implications and ramifications for U.S. family policy. Both President Kennedy and HEW Secretary Ribicoff briefly identified discrimination as one of the many causes of poverty in the United States. Yet neither addressed the matter in depth, and the reform proposals themselves did little to address the problem of racial discrimination in education or in hiring. Additionally, none of the bill's advocates refuted Newburgh supporters' claims that immoral African American families drove up welfare costs. As both welfare scholars and welfare rights advocates would later point out, the federal government's avoidance of the race issue implicitly condoned the states' unequal treatment of needy African American families and the growing racialized images of welfare recipients.⁶²



The emphasis on financial efficiency in the 1962 welfare reform debate also may have had long-term negative consequences for the nation's impoverished families. The monetary framework dehumanized conversations about the poor and evidenced a changing attitude toward the philosophy of welfare. Whereas the *Social Security Act of 1935* focused on society's humanitarian responsibilities, the rhetoric of the 1962 welfare reform debates centered more on the program's cost effectiveness. Although the 1962 welfare reforms did not cut welfare benefits, their underlying logic suggested that welfare's ultimate goal was not to provide a safety net but to encourage recipients to "bounce back" to self-sufficiency—and to do so in the most cost-efficient manner possible. The monetary and rehabilitative framework of the debate posed an additional threat to poor families, as it provided a justification for cutting welfare spending in the future if that "investment" in rehabilitation failed to pay dividends.



The depictions of welfare families in the 1962 reform debate had gendered implications that would remain significant in debates over welfare reform in the years to come. Continuing to uphold the "traditional" two-parent home as the social ideal, advocates of the welfare reform legislation of 1962 displayed some of the same antipathy toward unwed and single mothers as advocates of the Newburgh plan. Although the bill's supporters insisted that ADC mothers should pursue employment only when it was in the "best interest of the family," the 1962 bill's funding for day care, job training, and work and income incentives suggested that the legislation's supporters had come to view ADC mothers as being capable of getting themselves out of poverty.⁶³ By recognizing ADC mothers as employable, the 1962 welfare reform bill threatened single mothers' status as members of the "worthy" poor and laid the foundation for future welfare-to-work initiatives.

Conclusion

The debates surrounding the 1961 ADC-UP program, the Newburgh Plan, and the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962* established the context out of which the politics of the contemporary family policy debates emerged. These discussions helped shape Americans' conceptions of "the family" and the federal government's role in single-parent and two-parent homes. The 1961 debate over the ADC-UP program laid the foundation for the federal government's involvement in family life. The Newburgh Plan introduced a new portrait of the undeserving welfare "cheat," and the racial undertones of the Newburgh debate would echo through all subsequent welfare debates. The debate over the *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962* reinforced the two-parent home as the ideal, depicted single-parent homes as deficient, and laid the foundation for a rehabilitative approach to welfare reform that would later be manifested in welfare-to-work and other reform initiatives.



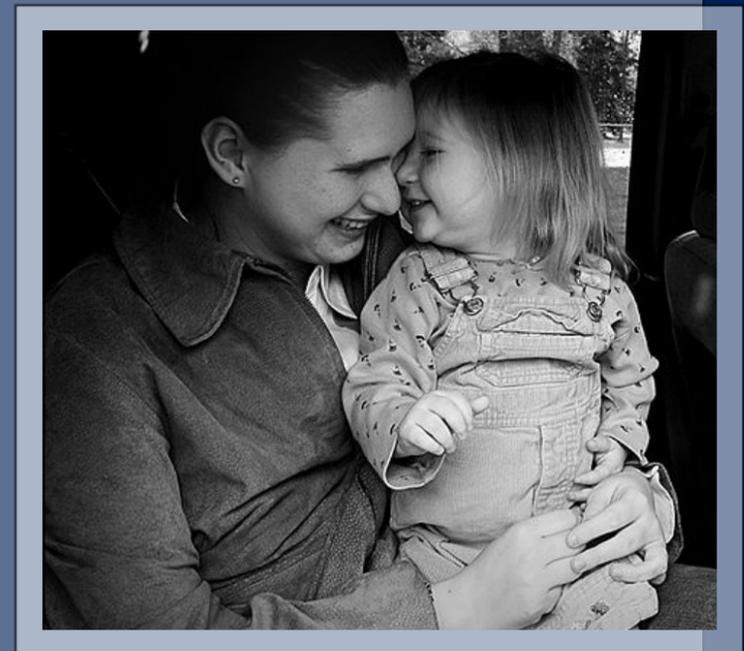
These early debates over welfare reform also previewed many of the specific issues that would undergird and provoke controversy during subsequent family policy debates. These debates show a growing concern with newly emerging forms of the American family. Although some Americans would not declare a family "crisis" until the mid-1960s or launch a "pro-family movement" until the mid-1970s, these earliest welfare reform debates reflect growing concerns over the health and stability of the

American family, especially in light of increased numbers of illegitimate births, divorces, and single-parent homes.

Widespread praise of the Newburgh plan suggests that Americans were coming to view family instability as a predominantly African American problem.⁶⁴ In *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, political scientist Martin Gilens observed that slavery “laid the foundations for the stereotype of blacks as lazy,” and for the next century and a half that stereotype continued to shape white Americans’ racial views and their “welfare policy attitudes as well.”⁶⁵ Newspaper coverage of the Newburgh plan reveals that many Americans sensed that the moral failures of African Americans had a lot to do with rising welfare costs and caseloads. Yet during the debate over the 1962 welfare reform amendments, few policymakers talked about the challenges facing African American families in particular and about how racial discrimination may have contributed to the disproportionate number of African American families on the welfare rolls.

These early debates over welfare reform drew attention to the nation’s changing attitudes toward the federal government’s role in family life. Although the Kennedy administration’s bills and the Newburgh plan implied competing images of needy families, all of the participants in these debates seemed to accept the need for more governmental intervention in the lives of poor families. All in all, these debates lent credence to the claim of Alvin L. Schorr, a Family Life Specialist at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, that, by 1962, the issue in family policy debates was not “whether the government has any responsibility or none, but whether its responsibility is larger or smaller.”⁶⁶

Despite their differing views about the federal government’s role in family life, all of the participants in the 1961-1962 welfare reform debates viewed family stability and family values as important social issues. Most seemed to agree that the two-parent family, with the “traditional” values of the stereotypical WASP family, was the best hope for helping poor people to escape the vicious cycle of poverty. All seemed to agree that self-sufficiency should be the goal of welfare policy, and all viewed some poor people as more “deserving” of help than others. Although more than fifty years have passed since these debates occurred, Governor Mitt Romney’s comments about the 47% of Americans allegedly “dependent upon the government”⁶⁷ reminds us that these negative images of the poor still shape our conversations today.



End Notes

¹ MoJo News Team, “Full Transcript of the Mitt Romney Secret Video,” *Motherjones.com*, September 19, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/full-transcript-mitt-romney-secret-video> (accessed December 9, 2012).

² MoJo News Team, “Full Transcript.”

³ Quoted in Dana Cloud, “The Rhetoric of <Family Values>: Scapegoating, Utopia, and the Privatization of Social Responsibility,” *Western Communication Journal* 62 (1998): 389.

⁴ “Women, Work, Welfare: A Rhetorical History of Images Of Poor Women in Welfare Policy Debates,” *Rhetoric & Affairs* 6, no. 2(2003): 285-312. See also Robert Asen, *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination* (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 2002).

⁵ Lisa Gring-Pemble, *Grim Fairy Tales: The Rhetorical Construction of American Welfare Policy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.)

⁶ Task Force on Health and Social Security, *Health and Social Security for the American People: A Report to President-Elect John F. Kennedy* (Ann Arbor, MI: Task Force, 1961), 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹ Alfred K. Kahn and Sheila B. Kamerman, *Not for the Poor Alone: European Social Services* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1975), xii.

¹⁰ John A. Nejedly, “Statement,” House Committee on Ways and Means, *Temporary Unemployment Compensation and Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 279.

¹¹ Nelson Cruikshank, “Statement,” House Committee on Ways and Means, *Temporary Unemployment Compensation and Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 296.

¹² *Ibid.*, 297.

¹³ Abraham Ribicoff, “Statement,” House Committee on Ways and Means, *Temporary Unemployment Compensation and Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 102.

¹⁴ John F. Kennedy, “Special Message to the Congress: Program for Economic Recovery and Growth, February 2, 1961,” in *The American Presidency Project*, eds. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters (Santa Barbara, CA) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu> (accessed February 18, 2013).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Arthur Greenleigh, “Statement,” House Committee on Ways and Means, *Temporary Unemployment Compensation and Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 329.

¹⁷ Cruikshank, “Statement,” 1961, 303.

¹⁸ John W. Tramburg, “Statement,” House Committee on Ways and Means, *Temporary Unemployment Compensation and Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 242.

¹⁹ Senate Committee on Finance, *Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents*, report prepared by Robert Byrd, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, Committee Print 165, 2.

²⁰ For a thorough discussion about how the government has used tax policy to promote social welfare, see: Christopher Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State: Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²¹ James T. Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty 1900-1985* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 2.

²² House Committee on Ways and Means, *Temporary Unemployment Compensation and Aid to Children of Unemployed Parents*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 104.

²³ Abraham Ribicoff, “Statement,” House, 1961, 95.

²⁴ Historian Linda Gordon noted that a lack of federal oversight allowed states to use “suitable home” and “fit parent” policies to “exclude whoever they wished” from the ADC program (276). Both Gordon and social policy scholar Winifred Bell found that minorities were among the groups most frequently denied ADC support. See Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Winifred Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

²⁵ Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945-1965* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 76-85.

²⁶ Abraham Ribicoff, “Statement,” House Committee on Ways and Means, *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, 64.

²⁷ Abraham Ribicoff, “The New Administration Looks at Social Welfare,” in *The Social Welfare Forum, 1961: Official Proceedings, 88th Annual Forum National Conference on Social Welfare, Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 14-19, 1961* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1961), 23.

²⁸ Ray Boyea, Frank Konysz, and Irving Weiner, “Report of the Committee to Study Welfare Operations to City Manager Joseph McDowell Mitchell May 8, 1961,” 32.

²⁹ “Newburgh Welfare Rules,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1961, 7. The 13 rules included: converting cash payments into voucher payments; assigning all able-bodied males on relief to work for the city’s building maintenance; denying relief to all recipients “physically capable of and available for private employment” who refused any employment offer; removing from the rolls any ADC mother who gave birth to an illegitimate child while receiving aid; denying relief to any applicant who voluntarily left a job; prohibiting any recipient family from receiving more aid than the

lowest paid city employee with a comparable family size; requiring a monthly review of all ADC files by the office of the corporation counsel; requiring all applicants who were new to the city to prove that they came to Newburgh with a firm job offer; limiting aid to persons except the aged, blind, and disabled to three months; requiring all employable recipients to report to the Department of Public Welfare for monthly reviews of their cases; prohibiting the Department of Public Welfare from exceeding its approved fiscal budget; establishing a fixed monthly expenditure limit on all categories of welfare aid; screening new ADC cases and removing from the home children of families who failed to meet satisfactory home requirements.

³⁰ Between June and December Mitchell delivered speeches about the plan across the country. According to Joseph P. Ritz, Mitchell delivered a standard speech to non-Newburgh audiences. Joseph P. Ritz, *The Despised Poor: Newburgh's War on Welfare* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), 37.

³¹ Joseph McDowell Mitchell, "The Revolt in Newburgh: The Failure of the Welfare Program (November 20, 1961)," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 28, no. 7 (January 1962): 215.

³² *Ibid.*, 215.

³³ *Ibid.*, 218.

³⁴ "New Policy Deplored," *New York Times*, June 27, 1961, 66.

³⁵ Mitchell, "The Revolt," 215.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁷ The court upheld the Newburgh Plan's provision requiring employable men on welfare to report to the welfare office monthly. Associated Press, "Court Overturns Newburgh Rules Limiting Welfare," December 20, 1961, *New York Times*, 38.

³⁸ A. H. Raskin, "Newburgh's Lessons for the Nation," *New York Times*, December 17, 1961, SM 7.

³⁹ "New York: The Welfare City," *Time*, July 28, 1961.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, "The Revolt," 216.

⁴¹ Foster Hailey, "Newburgh is Firm on Welfare Shift," *New York Times*, July 9, 1961, 47.

⁴² Meg Greenfield, "The Welfare Chiselers of Newburgh, N.Y.," *Reporter Magazine* (New York), August 17, 1961, 37.

⁴³ Joseph McDowell Mitchell, "Address before Newburgh Optimist Club, March 2, 1961," in Edgar May, *The Wasted Americans: Cost of Our Welfare Dilemma* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1964), 19.

⁴⁴ Ritz, *The Despised Poor*, 66.

⁴⁵ Lisa Levenstein, "From Innocent Children to Unwanted Migrants and Unwed Moms: Two Chapters in the Public Discourse on Welfare in the United States, 1960-1961," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 4 (2000): 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁷ "Text of Changes Ribicoff Ordered to Curb Abuses and Help Recipients," *New York Times*, December 12, 1961, 46.

⁴⁸ H.R. 10032, 87th Cong., 2d sess. Printed in House Committee on Ways and Means, *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*, 4.

⁴⁹ The Committee's ten "immediate steps" ranged from adding rehabilitative services to the Aid to Dependent Children program and dealing with the problem of illegitimacy to removing residence requirements for assistance and extending aid to the disabled. The four "proposals for further action" included providing assistance and rehabilitative services to family units, improving personnel for rehabilitative services, and improving the nation's child welfare services.

⁵⁰ Gary Bryner, *Politics and Public Morality: The Great American Welfare Reform Debate* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 67.

⁵¹ "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Public Welfare to The Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (September 1961)," reprinted in House Committee on Ways and Means, *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, 73.

⁵² Fern Colborn, "Statement" House Committee on Ways and Means, *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*, 87th Cong., 2d Sess., 1962, 349.

⁵³ "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee," 73.

⁵⁴ Abraham Ribicoff, "Statement," Senate Committee on Finance, *Public Assistance Act of 1962*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, 109.

⁵⁵ Patrick A. Tompkins, "Statement," House Committee on Ways and Means, *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, 426.

⁵⁶ Ribicoff, "Statement," Senate, 1962, 108.

⁵⁷ Kennedy, "Public Welfare."

⁵⁸ Ribicoff, "Statement," House, 1962, 166-168.

⁵⁹ Robert E. Bondy, "Statement," Senate Committee on Finance, *Public Assistance Act of 1962*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, 331.

⁶⁰ Dana Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: The Rhetoric of Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), xiv.

⁶¹ Cloud, *Control and Consolation*, 2.

⁶² See Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Pre-milla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).

⁶³ Ellen Winston, "Statement," House Committee on Ways and Means, *Public Welfare Amendments of 1962*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, 444.

⁶⁴ Media coverage emphasized public support for the plan as did the results of a Gallup Poll. See George Gallup, "Most of U.S. Favors Newburgh Aid Plan," *Los Angeles Times* August 11, 1961, p. 2; John H. Averill, "Newburgh Relief Crackdown Has Strong Popular Support," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 11, 1961, p. 2; "Newburgh is a Mirror Reflecting on Us All," *Washington Post*, Aug. 6, 1961, E1.

⁶⁵ Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 156.

⁶⁶ Alvin L. Schorr, "Family Policy in the United States," *International Social Science Journal*, UNESCO 14, no. 3 (1962): 463.

⁶⁷ MoJo News Team, "Full Transcript."