

THE HARD QUESTIONS

WELFARE PAIR

By Glenn C. Loury

Last spring, Robert M. Solow, the Nobel Prize-winning economist from M.I.T., gave one of the prestigious Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University. He spoke about welfare reform—a topic far from the theoretical research for which he is renowned, but one that is nevertheless dear to his heart. A liberal Democrat, Solow predictably lamented that President Clinton had signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—the 1996 legislation that ended welfare as a federal entitlement. However, being a non-sense analyst, rather than dwell on this lament, he went on to ask how the new law might be made to work better.

Now, several months later, James Q. Wilson of UCLA, perhaps the most influential political scientist of his generation, is asking the same question. A conservative Republican, Wilson was more sympathetic to the welfare reform effort. However, he, too, is gravely concerned: he fears we are not doing enough to promote the well-being of poor children. In early December, Wilson delivered the prestigious Boyer Lecture to a black-tie gathering in Washington, D.C., hosted by the American Enterprise Institute, under the title, "Two Nations." He spoke about policies that could help forestall a transformation of the United States into what Benjamin Disraeli, speaking of Victorian England, called "two nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy."

Their political differences notwithstanding, these two eminent social scientists are making weighty arguments that point in the same direction. And it's a direction different from the one in which our policymakers are going now. Solow and Wilson both believe that effective anti-poverty policy means spending more, not less, but spending it more wisely than we have in the past. Solow believes the new law's work requirements (adults must go to work within two years of first receiving benefits) need the "purposeful creation of jobs, in numbers, places and forms that are suitable for the people who will fill them." Wilson, concerned about impaired child development, argues that policymakers should concentrate on rebuilding the family. "If, as is now the case, how [children] are raised is left to overwhelmed women or institutional arrangements [then] the only way we can restore the balance is by committing money

to the task of inducing actions that were once the product of spontaneous arrangements."

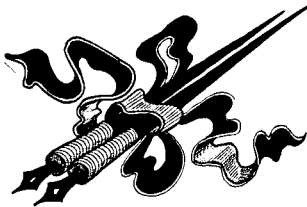
Solow and Wilson also share something else: namely, a belief that many welfare recipients are so ill-equipped to enter the mainstream workforce, even the best training programs won't reach them. In his Tanner lectures, Solow discussed the sobering results of welfare-to-work projects from the past decade: as many as a third of welfare recipients cannot find and keep jobs that pay enough to support their families. Wilson, drawing on his own previous research, told his audience—mostly business leaders and conservative policy intellectuals—that the root causes of social disorder are to be found early in life. When children do not receive the nurture that is essential for the development of sound character, they are much more likely to get caught up in violent crime, drug addiction, and illegitimacy. Accordingly, he proposed more intensive pre-school education—"much more intensive than what typically occurs in Project Head Start"—including parent training and home visitations along with child care. And, Wilson said, the government should fund residential programs for unmarried teenage mothers who have no competent adult to oversee their handling of the newborn, even though the annual cost of such a program might run as high as \$40,000 per mother.

Of course, this is not to say the two see eye to eye. But, connecting their respective lines of thought is the common insight that the personal resources, job skills, and child-rearing capacities of a sizable minority of welfare recipients are severely limited. As a result, even after several years of support, the perfectly foreseeable consequence of leaving many of these mothers and their children on their own is that we will produce a humanitarian disaster.

I came to the same conclusion myself on a recent visit to an educational program for welfare mothers in the New York City area. The program's offices are in a grim public housing project overlooking the Hudson River; the entrance door is pocked with bullet holes. Ostensibly, the program helps local welfare mothers earn their high school equivalency certificates by preparing them for an exam that requires reading and math skills at roughly the tenth-grade level. While the women are in class, the program provides high-quality day care for their children, some of whom are just a few months old.

I asked the dozen or so participants with whom I spoke what they expected to be doing two years hence. Each said she'd be holding down a good-paying job thanks to the equivalency certificate. Yet, the social worker directing the program confided in me that, based on her experience over the past six years, only a small minority—maybe as few as one in five—would ever pass the exam. So impaired is their cognitive and emotional development, she said, and so chaotic are their lives, that most of the women, even those who truly apply themselves, are unlikely to attain tenth-grade skill levels.

But success can be measured in more than one way.



The more important objective of the program, the director told me, is to give children a better chance. She recounted horror stories: a visit to a client's home finds a baby strapped into a stroller in front of a flickering television screen in an otherwise empty room; a toddler arrives with language skills so dramatically delayed as to suggest the virtual absence of verbal stimulation during infancy. Violent boyfriends, bouts of homelessness, unplanned pregnancies, and battles with addiction impede the mothers' progress. The director's bottom line: "It's all over by three. Either we reach these children early, or we can forget it."

For a decade, the core idea of welfare reform has been that nobody should get a free ride—recipients should work in return for their benefits. This is a sound principle, politically and morally. But it is not sufficient to guide policy in this area. There are recipients who will be unable to live up to their part of the bargain. And there are children whose dim prospects are given insufficient weight in the calculus of reciprocity. Fortunately, the wisest thinking, on both the left and the right, recognizes that we have unfinished business on the welfare front. Now, if only our politicians could muster the vision and the will to act. •

How the GOP lost Asian America.

THE LEE ROUT

By Peter Beinart

Say what you want about the merits of Bill Lann Lee's appointment as Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. But politically, it's a rout, a turkey shoot, a massacre. Years from now, political consultants wintering at the Kennedy School of Government will teach it for credit. It's not hard to imagine the question on the final exam: "Based on the assembled documents, explain how the Republican Party misunderstood the political psychology of a once-sympathetic ethnic minority, alienating it for decades."

Document One: Polling data from the 1992 general election. In 1992, George Bush lost African Americans and Latinos by large margins. He essentially tied Bill Clinton among whites. Among only one group did Bush crush his Democratic challenger—Asians, by 27 points. On Election Day, 1992, according to the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, more than three times as many Asians called themselves "conservative" as "liberal." They were, to put it bluntly, in the Republican Party's pocket.

Document Two: The text of California's Proposition 187 and the 1996 federal welfare reform bill. Asians voted Republican for two reasons. First, they were fiscally conservative.

A 1996 poll by the magazine *Asian Week* found 72 percent of Asians in support of a balanced budget amendment and 63 percent favoring a reduction in the size of "all government agencies." Second, many Asians—especially immigrants from Vietnam, South Korea, and Taiwan—responded positively to the GOP's anti-communism.

But, by the mid-1990s, anti-communism didn't matter much anymore. And the Republican Party fatefully waded into the politics of immigration, first with Proposition 187 in 1994, and then with the welfare reform bill two years later. Asian views on immigration, like Latino views, proved the political equivalent of quicksand: camouflaged enough to lure the GOP in, and powerful enough to suck them under. Polling data show that both Asians and Latinos are hostile to open borders—which makes sense considering that immigration probably depresses their wages more than those of whites. But Asians and Latinos also see attacks on newcomers as fueling racism that damages them as well. In short, Asians, like Latinos, are dubious about the value of immigration yet devoted to the rights of immigrants.

Proposition 187 and the welfare bill—which didn't change policy on the border but denied immigrants education, health, and old-age benefits—played that nuance exactly wrong, and spurred many angry Asians to naturalize, register, and vote. By the time Bob Dole took on Bill Clinton in 1996, the GOP's lead among Asians was down from 27 points to around five. A poll of first-time Asian American voters in California showed Clinton winning a majority.

Document Three: Testimony before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights on the Democratic National Committee's "harassment" of Asian Americans. In 1996, as we all know, the Clintonites seized on the newfound Asian affinity for Democrats to fill their campaign coffers. Asians gave generously to the president, and their increased influence became a political coming-out party of sorts. Many expected Clinton to appoint the nation's first Asian American Cabinet member as a show of gratitude.

It did not work out that way. After the John Huang story broke, many Asians felt overwhelmed by the ensuing anti-Asian publicity and betrayed by the president in their hour of need. In particular, Asians were stunned when the DNC hired the accounting firm of Ernst & Young to cold-call as many as 1,200 Asian donors to the Democratic Party. The donors were asked about their citizenship, their income, and their reasons for donating. They were told that if they didn't cooperate with the survey, their names would be released to the press. Those calls, detailed at a meeting of the Civil Rights Commission last month, sparked more fury among Asians than did any other government action during the finance scandal. And the fury was aimed not at the Republicans investigating the scandal, but at the Democrats.

Document Four: Press release by Yasuo Tokita, a Japanese-American Republican from Utah, supporting the nomination of Bill Lann Lee. But strangely, while the campaign finance scandal temporarily halted the move by Asians into the Democratic Party, it laid the groundwork for an

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