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Bill Clinton Was Right

He Saw the Roots of America's Welfare Problem

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As a conservative analyst who spent much of the 1990s working against most of Bill Clinton's agenda -- including even some aspects of his welfare reform proposals -- it pains me to say this.

Bill Clinton was right.

He deserves more credit for the passage of welfare reform than most conservatives probably care to admit.

No, Clinton didn't play a major role in shaping the policy details of the landmark 1996 act. But he understood something about policymaking that many conservative strategists and policy wonks could stand to re-learn: It isn't enough to get the technical details of a policy right. Words and symbols matter, too.

Indeed, thanks in large part to his effective use of words and symbols that challenged liberal orthodoxy on issues surrounding the poor, Bill Clinton not only helped "end welfare as we know it," but he helped end welfare as we know it *before anyone even knew it*.

To fully understand Clinton's role in the passage of this landmark legislation, one must go back to the early days of the 1992 presidential campaign when Clinton first began trying out his welfare themes. According to New York Times reporter Jason DeParle, Clinton regarded his welfare message as the "all-purpose elixir" of his campaign for the presidency.

It was a values message, an economic message and a policy message all in one. And it generated more interest than any other topic Clinton addressed.

A surprising thing about Clinton's welfare message is that it found resonance with many people in low-income neighborhoods. It won Clinton respect from the poor, a group most analysts figured would object strongly to any welfare reform plan.

DeParle reports that in the fall of 1991, Clinton dispatched campaign aide Celinda Lake to North Carolina to conduct focus groups with black voters. The campaign was worried that Clinton's pledge to "end welfare as we know it" might invite Virginia's black governor (and presidential aspirant) Doug Wilder to attack Clinton as a "racist."

Lake found otherwise. "The welfare message, worded correctly, plays extremely well in the black community," Lake reported. Low-income African-Americans were all for cutting welfare, so long as they sensed a corresponding commitment to help them acquire the dignity that comes from gainful employment.

A major turning point in the debate over welfare reform came in late 1993 when Clinton made a series of remarkable public statements about the links between social problems, welfare dependency and unwed childbearing. No president before him had addressed this topic.

It started in Memphis, where Clinton addressed a group of black church leaders. Employing the rhythm, cadence and blunt-spoken hard truths of an old-style sermon, it was the kind of speech that would have

caused most white liberals to turn red with embarrassment.

But the audience loved it, repeatedly interrupting with applause.

At one point in the speech, the president imagined what Martin Luther King, Jr. would say if he were "to reappear by my side today and give us a report card."

The slain civil rights leader, Clinton suggested, would say: "I did not live and die to see the American family destroyed. . . . I fought for freedom, but not for the freedom of . . . children to have children and the fathers of the children walk away from them and abandon them as if they don't amount to anything."

Later that day, at another black church in Memphis, Clinton attributed the rise in inner-city crime to four things: "the breakdown of the family, the breakdown of other community supports, the rise of drugs . . . and the absence of work."

Several weeks later, in a television interview with NBC, Clinton admitted that he had found "a lot of very good things" in Dan Quayle's infamous 1992 speech on family values. "I think he got too cute with 'Murphy Brown,'" Clinton said, "but it is certainly true that this country would be much better off if our babies were born into two-parent families.

"Once a really poor woman has a child out of wedlock," he continued, "it almost locks her and that child into the cycle of poverty, which then spins out of control further."

The president went on to note that, contrary to popular belief, this cycle of poverty is not primarily a problem of race. "If you look at the figures for black, two-parent families with children, their incomes are almost three times as high as single white mothers who had their children out of wedlock," Clinton said. "So, it's not, primarily 'a racial problem' -- it's a problem of income, family structure, and educational level."

Not surprisingly, Clinton's message astonished many liberals. They were embarrassed that one of their own was lamenting "the breakdown of the family" rather than using proper liberal-speak -- i.e., "The family isn't declining; it's simply changing or evolving."

Nevertheless, Clinton's bold rhetoric certainly got the attention of many low-income Americans. They heard him say it was harmful for women to have babies out of wedlock, and that the government was going to stop sending checks to people who refused to work.

That's why many welfare recipients began to change their behavior even before welfare reform legislation was adopted. Indeed, the day the welfare caseloads started to decline was the day Bill Clinton went on national TV and said that if we stopped giving welfare checks to low-income women, they'd have fewer out-of-wedlock babies.

Now, of course, for Clinton tough rhetoric was always easier than tough action. It took a Republican Congress to translate Clinton's rhetoric into reality. But Clinton's values talk helped jump start a decline in welfare dependence, and the work requirements and time limits in the actual legislation pushed this change into overdrive, stimulating an unprecedented plummet in welfare caseloads and poverty among single mothers.

Critically, Clinton's rhetorical boldness helped create a climate where national leaders could finally acknowledge the obvious -- that unwed childbearing, not race, was at the heart of our nation's welfare problem.

And Clinton's rhetorical boldness helped create a climate where serious welfare reform could take place. "You have to get the values right," Clinton told his aide Bruce Reed during the early stages of the process. "If you get the policy right and the values wrong, the whole thing will fail; but if you get the

values right, then this whole thing will work out."

To a large extent, Bill Clinton "got the values right" on welfare reform. And because he did, Clinton not only helped end welfare as we know it, but he helped end welfare as we know it *before anyone even knew it*.

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