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The Welfare Reservation: A Worst Case Scenario For A Federal Role In Homeless Assistance

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The purpose of the little-known Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 is stated as ". . . States, units of local government, and private voluntary organizations have been unable to meet the basic human needs of all the homeless and, in the absence of greater Federal Assistance, will be unable to protect the lives and safety of all the homeless in need of assistance: and the Federal Government has a clear responsibility and an existing capacity to fulfill a more effective and responsible role to meet the basic human needs and to engender respect for the human dignity of the homeless (U.S. Congress, 1987)"

Recent developments and policies could imply an increased use of surplus and underutilized federal facilities for programs for the homeless.

In a context of New Federalism proposals and a retreat from earlier anti-poverty efforts, the 1980's has been a decade in which poverty became significantly more pronounced in American society. In its most extreme and manifest form this has meant that at least hundreds of thousands of people have literally been dumped into the streets without a roof over their heads. Except for some limited homelessness during the Great Depression, the homelessness that emerged in the 1980's is unprecedented. What further makes the current homelessness extraordinary by comparison to that earlier period, is not only its greater scope and numbers, but also the facts that it has occurred in a period of economic growth and that the society as a whole has done so little about it.

When a problem looms in such extreme proportions, and its disregard is so extreme, the conceivable solutions are likely

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to be extreme as well. This paper explores what is admittedly an extreme proposal. Perhaps it can best be thought of as a worst case scenario. In essence, it has been my anticipation for some time that abandoned military bases in rural areas may be transformed into welfare reservations to which poor people would be relocated from urban centers (Conforti, 1972, 1977, 1982a, 1982b, 1983).

In November of 1983 the Federal Task Force on Food and Shelter for the Homeless came into existence. The task force, created by Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler at the direction of President Ronald Reagan, marked the initiation of the federal government's current endeavor to assist the homeless (Secretary of Health and Human Services, 1984).

It is the purpose of this paper to examine whether the anticipated possibility of the welfare reservation fits with the course of events since then, or if events and developments since then have been such as to undermine, or simply repudiate, such a possibility. This will be done primarily by examining federal programs and policies developed over this period to assist the homeless, that category of welfare-dependent poor people who would be the most likely to be moved to welfare reservations.

Precursors of a Federal Program

The federal government's role in assisting the homeless can be divided into several phases. The first could be characterized simply as acknowledgement of a problem. Just before leaving office in 1980 President Jimmy Carter commissioned a series of reports that included *Urban America in the Eighties* (President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties, 1980). In this report recognition was given to the changes occurring in many American cities, generating a very poor, highly dependent, increasingly homeless population, which the report referred to as the underclass, a term which gained much currency over the past decade (Auletta, 1982; Glasgow, 1981; Kornblum, 1984; Lemann, 1986; Wilson, 1987, 1989). Also in 1980 another form of recognition was given to homelessness by virtue of a count of the homeless being included in the decennial census (Burke, 1984).

In 1982 *The President's National Urban Policy Report* (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1982) set a tone for the federal approach to dealing with poverty during President Reagan's two-term administration. The Reagan policy orientation, which became known as the New Federalism, had three components: cuts in social welfare programs, consolidation of categorical programs into block grants to be administered by state governments and an eventual devolution of responsibility for social welfare programs from the federal to local levels of government.

In keeping with such a thrust, Congress allocated funds in 1983 for food distribution and emergency shelters. The funds were initially allocated to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which was in turn directed by Congress to allocate the funds to local levels of government and private voluntary organizations through a national board. The national board was to be comprised of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, together with The United Way of America, the Salvation Army, the Council of Churches, the National Conference of Catholic Charities, the Council of Jewish Federations, Inc., and the American Red Cross (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 1983). This body was allocated approximately \$100,000,000.00 to distribute to local programs for the homeless over a period of two years.

The Federal Task Force

When the Federal Task Force on Food and Shelter for the Homeless was established in 1983 it was viewed as an interagency unit led by the Department of Health and Human Services, including the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Energy, Interior, Labor, Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation, together with the General Services Administration, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, ACTION, the Census Bureau, the Veterans Administration and the Postal Service. This was designed primarily as a coordinating effort, rather than an effort to focus new resources on homelessness. This is reflected in the assumptions on which the task force was based:

1. homelessness is essentially a local problem;
2. new federal programs for the homeless are not the answer;
3. knowledge of strategies used in many communities to help the homeless needs to be transferred to other communities (Secretary of Health and Human Services, 1984, p.6).

Its main thrust was to facilitate the distribution of surplus food from military commissaries, provide transportation to food banks by the National Guard, turn HUD-held houses over to local voluntary organizations to be used as shelters and to help arrange for local groups to get other facilities that might be turned into shelters such as a federally owned warehouse that the General Services Administration renovated. With apparently no new resources available to it, the task force undertook to enhance the likelihood that already available resources reached the local voluntary organizations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1984; Federal Task Force on the Homeless, 1985).

Other Initiatives

While the task force served as a liaison between the several federal agencies and local organizations, some federal agencies undertook efforts of their own. The Department of Housing and Urban Development conducted research to measure the extent of homelessness (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1984a). This effort largely served to deflate the scope of homelessness by its embracing the lowest estimates of how many people were homeless in the United States (Hopper, 1984).

The Department of Defense took an ostensibly magnanimous position in offering its facilities. In an internal memorandum to the secretaries of the military forces the Secretary of Defense (1984) stated "The Department has permanent authorization to provide shelter and incidental services (10 USC 2546). We have all the authority we need to be good partners with local elected officials and religious and charitable organizations. There is sufficient money in the Department appropriation for us to absorb the expenses we are allowed to incur even in the

absence of a specific appropriation for the purpose of helping provide shelter for the homeless." In addition to their own funds, Congress allocated the Pentagon \$8,000,000.00 in 1984 to further facilitate its making Department of Defense facilities available to shelter the homeless. But of the \$8,000,000.00, the Department of Defense was only able to spend \$900,000.00, reflecting the difficulty it encountered in finding local requests for the facilities and services it offered (Department of Defense summary Report, 1984; *Time*, 1984).

In his 1986 State of the Union Address, President Ronald Reagan undertook to focus attention on poverty and welfare by calling for "...an evaluation of programs and a strategy for immediate action to meet the financial, educational, social, and safety concerns of poor families." The charge was directed to the White House Domestic Policy Council, which in turn established the Low-Income Opportunity Working Group. This large group thus presumably undertook to conduct *the* major analysis of poverty to the end of emphatically putting forth strategies that would be both new and bold.

In a certain sense it was a major project, producing a multi-volume report of more than a thousand pages. It even had a dramatic title: *UP FROM DEPENDENCY: A New National Public Assistance Strategy* (Domestic Policy Council Low Income Opportunity Working Group, 1986; 1987; 1988). The results of all this effort, however, were both surprising and redundant. Surprising because in over a thousand pages homelessness was not taken into account as a component of poverty or as a welfare problem that needed to be addressed. This may, in part at least, simply reflect the fact that the homeless are usually excluded from welfare programs (Freeman and Hall, 1987; Redburn and Buss, 1987). But it also implies an acceptance of such exclusion.

It was redundant in that it put forth strategies that were neither new nor bold. In what was titled "A New National Public Assistance Strategy," it was suggested that "It is time both to learn from, and to repair, the mistakes of our centralized system with a new national public assistance strategy that stresses grass-roots participation, state and local initiative, and ideas for reducing dependency." This was followed by several

specific recommendations stressing the need to shift as much responsibility as possible from the federal government to the local governments, the community, the family and the individual. This was still another reiteration of the New Federalism, reflecting the ideological perspective of such early influences on the Reagan administration as Stuart A. Butler (1985) and Emanuel S. Savas (1982), which continued through the entire decade (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1982; 1984b; 1986; 1988a).

The McKinney Act

While the Reagan Administration maintained a consistent stance of federal retreat from social welfare responsibility, the two houses of Congress debated a new program to assist the homeless, eventuating in the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in July of 1987. In its initial statement of purpose in the Act the Congress notes "due to the record increase in homelessness, states, units of local government, and private voluntary organizations have been unable to meet the basic human needs of all the homeless and, in the absence of greater Federal assistance, will be unable to protect the lives and safety of all the homeless in need of assistance; and the Federal Government has a clear responsibility and an existing capacity to fulfill a more effective and responsible role to meet the basic human needs and to engender respect for the human dignity of the homeless (U.S. Congress, 1987)."

The act incorporated the Federal Task Force on Food and Shelter as the Interagency Council on the Homeless, maintained many of the efforts already being pursued by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Health and Human Services. But it also introduced new programs, particularly shelter programs directed through HUD. In view of the comprehensive thrust of the act and the infusion of more than a billion dollars of new funds (almost \$2 billion by the end of 1990), the McKinney Act would seem to represent at least a bolder and somewhat newer thrust.

To some degree it is too soon to judge the impact of the McKinney Act (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1987). But because the McKinney Act requires an annual report by the

Interagency Council on the Homeless, it is possible to examine whether or not this new initiative has changed the perspective of the federal government's approach to poverty and welfare. In its first annual report *A Nation Concerned*, the Interagency Council on the Homeless (1989) emphasizes such terms as "the American tradition of localism and philanthropy," "privatism and localism," "nonprofit and private sectors" and "local nonprofit organizations." A detailed reading of the report makes it quite clear that there is nothing new in the approach. The emphasis throughout is that all the components of homelessness in all their configurations should be dealt with at the local level. In keeping with the devolution thrust of the New Federalism, the Council recommends that "over time, the McKinney Act programs and others that deal directly with homelessness should be integrated into existing programs (Interagency Council on the Homeless, 1989 1-13)."

Welfare Reservations?

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, whether events have developed in such a manner as to support or challenge the anticipation of the welfare reservation, the answer is both yes and no. It is most emphatically no in terms of the policies and programs of the federal government over the past decade. There has been a consistent effort to define all welfare needs as essentially local matters, best left to private philanthropy if at all possible, with the federal role limited strictly to financing, as minimally as possible.

It should also be noted that this is not just the residue of the Reagan years, at least not thus far. The Bush Administration, following a study by the President's Domestic Policy Council, announced early that it would undertake no new initiatives to combat poverty (New York Times, 1990a).

On the other hand, it is precisely the maintenance of this approach, and the fact that it does not adequately address the problem, that is one basis for still anticipating the welfare reservation. While the federal government has sought to downplay the scope of homelessness, most observers seem to agree that there has been considerable growth of an increasingly manifest population of homeless people (Erikson and Wilhelm, 1986;

Hope and Young, 1986; New York Times, 1989a; The United States Conferences of Mayors, 1989).

Closely related as a second basis is the emerging consensus that local governments and private charities do not have the resources needed to cope with the problem (Bingham, Green and White, 1989: The United States Conference of Mayors, 1989). A simple example of this is available in terms of the particularly intractable problem of the mentally ill homeless. In 1985 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation joined with HUD to set up a five year program providing funds to deal with the homeless mentally ill in large urban centers (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 1985). But five years later the Interagency Council established its own "Task Force on Severe Mental Illness and Homelessness" to figure out how to deal with the problem (Interagency Council on the Homeless, 1990).

Nor is the federal assistance being provided through the McKinney Act to local governments and private charities always sufficiently accessible. In providing "Supplemental Assistance for Facilities to Assist the Homeless," a program administered by HUD with McKinney Act funds, a local program must make a ten year commitment to serving the homeless in order to qualify for funds (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1988b). Similarly, to qualify for the Emergency Shelter Grant Program, local governments must annually submit a detailed "Comprehensive Homeless Assistance Plan," covering all aspects of all efforts to serve the homeless in their jurisdictions, and additionally they must match the grant with an equal amount of money acquired elsewhere (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989).

A third basis is that there is a widespread disaffection on the part of the general public with the homeless, or at least that segment of the homeless population they encounter in public places (Painton, 1990). The homeless are feared as dangerous, are seen as a nuisance (such as beggars) and in general most people seem to want them out of sight and cared for by someone else. And they are being pushed out of many public spaces, though only to immediately move on to other public spaces. There is still another basis for anticipating the possibility of the welfare reservation. That is the simple fact that all the resources necessary

to such an integrated approach to homelessness are available. It was noted earlier that as far back as 1983 the Department of Defense was authorized by Congress to use its resources to serve the homeless. That it had few requests for military installations to serve as shelters, was mainly a reflection of the insistence that homelessness was a local problem. The few requests it did have came from urban areas where there were military facilities that could be used on a local basis, such as Philadelphia, Albuquerque, Corpus Christi, Alameda County near San Francisco and Montgomery County near Washington, D.C. (Department of Defense Summary Report, 1984; *Time*, 1984).

If the federal government was willing to define shelters and related facilities on a federal or regional basis (that crossed local and state boundaries), it could provide far more assistance to the homeless than it has thus far. The sites for such facilities would be military bases that have been defined as obsolete, surplus or underutilized. There are quite a number of them in the north, reflecting in part the Pentagon's preference for bases in warmer climates. These bases have long been kept active only in response to pressure from local groups concerned with the economic impact their closing threatened. But in December of 1988 a federal commission recommended the closing of over 80 bases throughout the United States (*New York Times*, 1988; 1989b). This closing of bases has been further accentuated by the thaw in tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, reflected in the recent dismantling of the huge base in Fort Hood Texas (*New York Times*, 1990b).

The alternative use of such sites as welfare reservations could serve to meet the needs of both the military and the local economy. The threat of closing an active base would probably also diminish local resistance to establishment of a welfare reservation, much as rural areas welcome prisons as economic assets.

The federal government would probably retain ownership and ultimate jurisdiction over such sites, but not necessarily administrative responsibility. In keeping with the sentiment of emphasizing private philanthropy, private voluntary organizations could administer such facilities.

The idea of removing very poor homeless people from urban centers and relocating them to isolated military bases is of

course taken up with great hesitation. The prospect was always thought of as a worst case scenario and the term reservation was purposely chosen to draw a parallel with Indian reservations and the travail they have represented. But it should be remembered that the Indian reservations were at the time of their establishment the alternative to complete genocide. Similarly, there is a considerable consensus that a majority of homeless people are in need of various kinds of medical, psychiatric, nutritional and other services, in addition to shelter. That they have generally not received those services and are still out on the streets, clearly indicates that current efforts and resources are not sufficient.

Those who have studied welfare have emphasized that changes in the way welfare services are organized and delivered commonly derive from the limitations of the way in which they were previously organized and delivered (Katz, 1986). This lends itself to a repetitive cycle. such a cycle has been identified by David J. Rothman (1971) in terms of the distinction between "indoor" and "outdoor" relief. In his study of the development of institutional facilities in the 19th Century, he stressed that during the colonial period institutional facilities were almost nonexistent in the United States. Except in rare (extreme) cases, the poor, sick or mentally ill were provided "outdoor" relief. They were cared for at home or at least in the local community.

After 1820 institutional facilities were developed to address the needs of those who could not function normally in the community. According to Rothman (1971), the perspective that guided their development had two components: that adequate care could not be provided through outdoor arrangements and that the very problems to be addressed were caused and aggravated by negative environmental influences which would have to be counterbalanced and neutralized through indoor institutional arrangements.

After the 19th Century institutions became well established, the expectations on which they flowered withered away. It became ever clearer that rather than rehabilitate, the institutions would serve as holding tanks for undesirables (Rothman, 1971: chs. 10-11). That realization inspired efforts at reform that set the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction, away from

indoor relief and toward outdoor relief. Rothman (1980) identifies this movement in the early twentieth century development of parole and probation. Lerman (1982) notes further movement in this direction during the depression when economic conditions were so obvious a societal cause of poverty that attribution to the individual was undermined and outdoor relief (through various programs of income maintenance) became more acceptable. The New Deal programs served as a major thrust toward the expansion of outdoor relief, as did the Economic opportunity Act of 1964. The outdoor thrust was most obvious in the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill that began in the late 1950's and continued into the 1980's (Curtis, 1986; Lerman, 1982, 1985).

Insofar as deinstitutionalization, the contraction of public housing programs and the elimination of anti-poverty programs (Katz, 1989, Wolch and Gabriel, 1985) have combined with other factors in such a manner as to make outdoor relief unworkable, the swing back to indoor relief seems inevitable. Indeed these terms have come to have particularly literal significance over the past decade.

What needs to be addressed in a consideration of the welfare reservation is the balance between the unmet needs it could meet and the dangers it poses. For the most part this balance revolves about the needs of the homeless, how they have or have not been met up to now and how they might best be met in the future. The greatest single need is, by definition, shelter. But their needs go well beyond shelter. The Ohio Department of Mental Health in 1985 suggested that there were three groups of homeless people (about 80% of the homeless) whose needs went beyond that of temporary shelter (Redburn and Buss, 1986). They included those who had temporary crises such as family dissolution or job loss; those who needed developmental assistance, such as drug rehabilitation or job training; and those in need of permanent custodial care, such as those with significant physical or mental impairments. The latter two groups comprised almost 60% of the homeless population addressed (Redburn and Buss, 1986: ch. 6). A more recent survey by the Urban Institute identified similar proportions of homeless people with needs beyond shelter (Burt and Cohen, 1989). Others

have similarly noted the needs of the homeless beyond shelter (Daly, 1990; Hope and Young, 1986).

It is specifically those in need of developmental assistance or custodial care for whom the welfare reservation is conceivably an accommodating arrangement, particularly when such needs are not otherwise being addressed. It is difficult to imagine how homeless individuals and families in need of various developmental or custodial services would not benefit from the concentrated coordination of such services when they are otherwise not available. It is also difficult to locate very many instances in which local governments and the non-profit voluntary organizations can or do provide so comprehensive an array of services.

At the same time that these facilities and services are desperately needed, their delivery through welfare reservations is fraught with dangers. The most general danger is that once out of sight, the homeless would be equally out of mind. Given the reluctance with which the needs of the homeless have been met, in combination with the many efforts to displace them, their removal from urban centers would in itself be viewed as the solution to the problem by many people. A similarly overarching danger is that the homeless, having been displaced from the society's mainstream institutions, might never be welcomed back. There are also a variety of particular dangers parallel to those of the Indian reservations. One is the danger facing children when their isolation in the rural areas of an urban society compound a variety of other disadvantages. There are similarly the dangers of neglect and abuse in all specific areas of need.

On balance, the welfare reservation does not represent the solution to homelessness. Where homeless people have very specific and limited needs such as the need for long term shelter, food or income assistance, such needs probably can and certainly should be met locally. The closer to the community such people stay, the easier re-integration into the community should be.

But in those instances where the needs are much greater and not likely to be met at the local level, the welfare reservation would provide a needed vehicle through which the federal government could bring together those resources that the McKinney Act promised. This does however require a major

change in federal policy. The federal government would have to acknowledge a national responsibility for assisting the homeless that superceded local jurisdictions of responsibility and a corresponding obligation to provide direct assistance. Fort Dix, one of the largest military bases being closed, could well serve the homeless of New Jersey, where it is located. But to preclude serving the homeless of Philadelphia and New York City from such a facility would contradict the promise, commitment and value of the McKinney Act.

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