THE FUTURE OF THE WELFARE STATE

Social programs and social obligations

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When we speak of the welfare state and its problems, we refer to something much larger than just social programs meant for the poor. Today, all Americans are "on welfare" in the sense that they claim benefits they have not directly earned from government programs. And since Social Security, Medicare, and other programs that cover the general population are mainly responsible for the government's fiscal problems, we must say that the welfare state and its crisis are solidly middle-class.

Yet the most troubling problems of the welfare state do concern "welfare" in the narrower sense of programs meant for the needy. I have in mind here Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), other welfare programs, food stamps, Medicaid, and a number of federal compensatory education and training programs. All were instituted or expanded during the Great Society period of the 1960's and early 1970's. All are carried out at federal behest by state, local, or nonprofit agencies mostly using federal money.

These programs were supposed to help the "disadvantaged." The term is awkward and euphemistic, as are "lower-class" and "underclass," later names for much the same group. The dilemma this group has posed for federal policy is that its problems are not simply economic. The disadvantaged are "poor" or at least low-income,
but they are also “different.” Historically, they have lacked sufficient income and opportunity, but they also have problems functioning in society—that is, in getting through school, working, supporting their families, keeping on the right side of the law, and in general behaving the way Americans expect of each other. There seem to be 10 million or more Americans who are disadvantaged in this sense.¹

Now the main goal of the welfare state has always been to integrate the disadvantaged into mainstream society. Achieving this has been seen to be the most critical social challenge facing the country since President Kennedy and his New Frontiersmen rediscovered poverty. If blacks and other heavily disadvantaged groups indeed exist apart from mainstream society, integration means that they should be able to join society as equals.

The crisis of the welfare state is that integration has not been achieved; the goal may even be receding. Or rather, it has been achieved only in a minimal, economic sense. The federal government has given greatest emphasis to overcoming the economic aspects of disadvantage, in part because these were the aspects government could most directly control, and it has succeeded in removing many deficiencies in income and opportunity. Federal edicts have largely eliminated overt discrimination in education, hiring, and housing. There is even a degree of preference for nonwhites in education and public sector employment because of affirmative action. The government’s income transfer programs along with more equal opportunity for minorities and economic growth have reduced economic poverty to extremely low levels. According to the Census Bureau, which considers only money income from earnings and government benefits, the proportion of the population living in poverty dropped from 22 percent in 1960 to less than 12 percent in 1979. And if we include in-kind benefits such as health care and unreported earnings, the level falls to 8 percent or less.² The disadvantaged could certainly still use more income and opportunity than they have, but lack of these is no longer the main barrier to their integration.

The behavioral aspect of disadvantage, in contrast, has not been solved and may even be getting worse. It has become clear that merely opening doors for the lower class and raising its income does not assure it the skills and attitudes necessary to participate more fully in American life. Indeed, the social capacities of the group seem actually to have declined as its income and prospects have risen. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan first noted in his famous report of 1965, this problem is particularly acute for disadvantaged blacks. While many blacks have seized on their greater opportunity to enter the middle class, those remaining in inner-city neighborhoods seem even more remote from it than a generation ago. Crime, family instability, learning problems in the schools—all are worse in low-income areas today than they were before the disadvantaged became an object of federal policy. Something about public attention and programs has unhinged the lower class rather than helped it assimilate to mainstream society.

One can blame these trends only in part on parallel developments in the population as a whole. It is true that Americans in general may be less law-abiding, committed to the family, and well-schooled today than they once were. But most Americans still have civil attitudes toward one another. They are still able to rely on each other in politics, at work, and in the other social exchanges that make up daily life. For the lower class, the decline in civility has been much sharper, to the point at which the fear of crime seriously restricts the possibility of economic or social cooperation in low-income areas. More than any further economic resource, the disadvantaged now need a more secure sense of order in themselves and the neighborhoods around them. They need to be able to trust themselves and others. Their problem is now more a moral one than an economic one, and so is the challenge facing the welfare state.

Out of the mainstream

The underclass seems to be dropping out of society, not joining it. In particular, disadvantaged workers seem to be withdrawing from the mainstream economy. It used to be that blacks and other low-income groups sought and found work in roughly the same proportions as the white and the better-off. In economic terms, there was a kind of integration, though blacks of course had access to few prestigious careers and earned less relative to whites. Since 1960, there has been almost a reversal. Segregation of a for-
mal kind has been done away with, but overall black participation in the economy has declined. Educated blacks have advanced to near economic parity with white peers, but the proportion of all adult black men working or seeking work has dropped 12 points (to 71 percent), even while that of other groups (including black and white women) has risen. And while a gap in unemployment rates always existed between the better-off and disadvantaged groups, the gap has grown. In the most publicized case, nonwhite teenagers used to find work about as easily or more easily than whites, but their unemployment rates are now much higher, often over 40 percent.

It is impossible to explain these changes in the ordinary way by appealing to lack of jobs, discrimination, or other social conditions over which the disadvantaged have no control. On the contrary, research strongly suggests that, except perhaps in depressed areas, work is no less available to low-skilled workers today than it was in earlier generations. Most of the higher unemployment among disadvantaged groups is due to their tendency to turn over in jobs more rapidly than the better-off, not to greater difficulty in finding jobs. Indeed, the economy during the 1970's created a great many entry-level, service-oriented jobs with few special skill requirements, jobs the disadvantaged should have found accessible. The baby boom generation entering into work, women taking jobs to keep up with inflation, legal and illegal immigrants—all flooded into these jobs, increasing the nation's workforce enormously. But relatively few of the underclass joined them.

What has changed most seems to be the willingness of disadvantaged workers to accept the jobs they are able to get, not the ease of finding them. Unquestionably, low-skilled jobs are usually poorly paid, menial, and relatively unpleasant. But in previous eras immigrant and low-skilled workers usually accepted such jobs in the hopes that they or their offspring could improve their condition through hard work, saving, education, or political or trade union activity. Today's disadvantaged are more likely to shift restlessly from job to job, drop out and enter the underground or illegal economy where earnings are higher, or live off welfare or other programs.

This puts an integrated society at risk. Government may choose

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to elevate the public income of the lower class, but most of American life occurs in the private sector, not the public. It is difficult to see how the disadvantaged can become mainstream Americans, in either their own eyes or the eyes of others, without a greater commitment to the mainstream economy; this is where further integration must take place. The low-skilled workers joining the private economy today are more likely to be legal or illegal aliens than disadvantaged Americans. Official unemployment rates may be high, but employers often find that they cannot fill menial, low-paid jobs and keep them filled without turning to aliens. There seem to be 10 to 12 million illegal aliens in the country, about as many as there are Americans on AFDC. Of course, more of the aliens than the welfare recipients are employable, since fewer are women and young children, but the conclusion is inescapable: Aliens are doing many of the jobs that would have been done by recipients only twenty years ago.

Does welfare prevent integration?

Why the welfare state fails to integrate the underclass has been a profound mystery to Washington. Over the past decade policymakers have had nothing to propose besides new and different combinations of benefits and services. Conservatives, who always distrusted the Great Society, succeeded only in cutting back the programs last year. The Reagan administration persuaded Congress to eliminate some programs and restrict eligibility or benefits in others, and the cuts drew surprisingly bipartisan support. They did not, however, display any understanding of the social integration problem and how to solve it. On the contrary, they almost amounted to an official admission of defeat.

What must be questioned are the liberal assumptions that have shaped development of the welfare state. Since the formative period of the Great Society, federal policy has consistently assumed that problems of disadvantage can be traced to "barriers" of some social or material kind outside the individual. The point of programs was to "compensate" for the "deficits" in recipients' incomes and services. Even training and education programs, whose purpose was to impart skills, were conceived as "resources" to be given to the poor. Conservatives differed with liberals over how much

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of these things should be given to the disadvantaged, but both agreed that the nature of programs is to give people resources they need.

The liberal view was plausible as long as disadvantage could be substantially blamed on racial discrimination. Many, though far from all, of the disadvantaged were black, and it was easy to imagine that they had few reasons to behave responsibly so long as a racist society did not reward them for doing so. But this view becomes less and less compelling as time goes by and as historical discrimination and economic poverty decline. America is still far from colorblind, but neither does it have a caste system.

It is more plausible today that the troubling behavior and condition of the disadvantaged is due to the social programs on which so many are dependent. The programs, after all, govern the lives of much of the underclass in a more direct way than does the history of discrimination. Their drawback may be that they merely give things to their recipients; to a fresh eye, what is remarkable about federal service and benefit programs is that they support recipients while expecting next to nothing in return. There is virtually no reciprocity, no need to function or serve others in the way other Americans making their way in society without dependency must. The programs assure the recipients a certain income, but they undercut the mores about public behavior that the disadvantaged would have to assume to enter more fully into American life.

Specifically, welfare programs contain no effective requirements that recipients work in return for their benefits. In theory, employable recipients of AFDC and other welfare programs (that is, mothers with children over six, teenagers not in school, and adult men) are supposed to accept work or training or lose their benefits, and people on unemployment insurance are supposed to look for work. In fact, the requirements are not effectively enforced and few recipients take them seriously. Welfare-work programs are only able to involve a small proportion of the employable recipients in training or job search, and they usually lack the authority to make recipients actually work, even when jobs are available.\(^5\) The Reagan administration has proposed toughening the AFDC work test, but it is questionable whether stiffer requirements could be enforced under the present scheme.

The procedures of federal programs, even the work programs, are so consistently interpreted in the language of rights and benefits that it is difficult to make clear to recipients that they have any obligations. Social workers who try to persuade clients to accept responsibility for their own poverty or unemployment say that they are often defeated by the policy of their own programs, which emphasizes government's responsibility to help people. Recipients can hardly walk into an AFDC work office without confronting signs (in English and Spanish) informing them, not of their work obligations, but of their rights to appeal if the program should cut their benefits for any reason. The problem is not confined to welfare and the underclass. Every American knows from his own or others' experience that people on unemployment insurance often do not become serious about seeking a new job until the benefit checks are about to run out.

A juridical welfare state

To improve the welfare state, we have to start looking at it from a juridical and not simply economic point of view. Programs imply a certain balance of rights and obligations for recipients; a more even balance of benefits and obligations seems critical for the success of the programs. My own studies of the welfare work-test suggest that programs that make the work obligation clear to recipients are more likely to place them in jobs. That is, welfare recipients are more likely to function properly when they know what is expected of them, and are less likely to function properly when they do not.  

From a juridical viewpoint, programs should try to assure recipients the same balance of rights and obligations that non-dependent people face in their daily lives. The needy should be supported, but they should also be expected to work if employable, to stay in school if young, to obey the law, and so on. They should be treated in both respects, so far as possible, as other people are treated. This seems the only way that programs can support and justify, rather than tacitly undercut, the civic sense their clients need to progress in American society. It is the only way they can deal with the behavioral as well as economic aspect of disadvantage.

But what does it mean to expect things of people using public programs? The question is seldom asked in American government, and the answers to it are not at all clear. Somehow, government must create obligations, an administrative apparatus to implement them, and a surrounding climate of opinion that convinces people that the requirements are both legitimate and enforceable. It must, in short, overcome the authority problems that seem to plague the welfare state and American domestic policy in general.

In welfare, a juridical program administration would have to balance benefits and obligations in the desired way. The problem is to link support with requirements (like work) so recipients accept some responsibility for their own situation and do not assume that all assistance is to come at the hands of government. That requires difficult political decisions about the specific requirements, followed by consistent administration. Right now, enforcement of the work test in welfare is so discretionary and haphazard that neither recipients nor welfare staff see a uniform requirement.

The federal tax system or Social Security could serve as a model. These programs succeed in implementing obligations and benefits that are universally accepted in American life, even though individual cases differ. The public clearly understands that everyone is supposed to pay income and Social Security taxes while working and then receive Social Security benefits upon retirement, but in these systems people only differ financially. All are working or have worked. No invidious questions need be asked about their behavior. Administration can be reduced to rules and requires little discretion. In welfare, on the other hand, it seems questions about behavior must be asked, the staff needs more discretion, and personal authority must be exercised over clients. For all these reasons, welfare administration has never acquired much institutional legitimacy.

The main focus here, however, is on the difficulty of justifying such an arrangement to officials and the general public. Americans would have to accept that social obligations enforced by programs were in some way parallel to political obligations. They accept a balance of rights and obligations in the political realm; they understand that the freedom to make demands on government must be balanced by such obligations as obedience to the law, respect for the rights of others, payment of taxes, and (if there is a draft) service in the military. A juridical social policy would require a similar balance between public benefits and social obligations, such as work.
Barriers to imposing obligations

Despite the merit of a juridical view of the welfare state, there are firmly entrenched institutional and intellectual barriers to embracing it. One is that federal officials are ill-equipped to approach policy in juridical terms. Program planners in the federal social departments—Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development—have overwhelmingly been trained as economists or other social scientists, not as lawyers or political philosophers. Their academic training emphasizes the quantitative analysis of social conditions. Therefore they concentrate primarily on the material aspects of social problems and programs, since these are the easiest to quantify for statistical analysis, rather than on the moral or administrative aspects. Those work requirements for welfare that do exist have usually been instituted by congressional committees without the benefit of social science analysis, and ordinarily against the advice of the executive bureaucracy.

In Washington, debates over social policy are conducted in economic or technical terms, but the issues are often juridical, having to do with how rights and obligations are assigned. For instance, the main employment policy under the Carter administration was to try to move the disadvantaged and unemployed into work by offering them "public service employment" (subsidized jobs in local public and nonprofit agencies). The jobs were to provide clients with better wages and working conditions than they could get in the private sector. Under the Reagan administration, the policy is to eliminate these programs and return to placing people in the private economy. In between are proposals for subsidized jobs in the private sector or for more job-placement programs.

Proponents of all these positions are prone to engage in highly technical discussions about which approach will "work" best, but the real issue is a moral one: Where does the responsibility for employment lie? All sides realize that many low-paid jobs already exist but are not what the disadvantaged prefer. But who is supposed to close this gap? Is government obligated to guarantee "decent" jobs for all? Or is the client obligated to accept a less attractive job already available in the private sector? Which has the right to obligate the other?

Because so many federal officials are trained to conceive and solve problems technically, they usually ignore issues of social obligation and just assume government is supposed to meet human needs. This makes the problems harder to solve because
the recipient groups then have little reason to assume any responsibility themselves. Officials and researchers keep coming up with plausible explanations and ways to improve the programs, but the real difficulty may be that government assumes all responsibility. This casts the welfare and youth client-groups in the role of making demands on government, when integration requires that they make some demands on themselves. Employers say that the main reason poor minority youth are difficult to employ is that they have not accepted the discipline associated with work. They do not lack energy or ability, but they do not know what employers and customers expect of them on the job. And given the rhetoric of federal programs—that solutions lie with government—neither government nor business has the authority to tell them.

The liberal-conservative confusion

Yet even if federal officials understood the obligation problem, they would probably not have the intellectual resources to solve it. American welfare-state issues are usually discussed in ways that do not even recognize the problem, let alone solve it. The conventional liberal and conservative approaches to social policy allow us to debate the extent of government activity but not its character. The two differ over how much government should do for the needy, but neither contemplates giving recipients clearcut obligations.

Conservatives want to cut back the welfare state more than they want to change its nature. The Reagan budget cuts of last year eliminated some programs and reduced case loads in others, but did little to strengthen the work obligations of the recipients that remained. Recipients may even be less likely to work because economic incentives were reduced. The Reagan administration, which would like to have work tests strengthened, seeks to devolve responsibility for this and other welfare issues to lower levels of government. There is little sense that the federal government might actually use work programs to set clearer standards for the needy.

In a sense, cutting back the welfare state does solve the juridical problem. Recipients who are removed from programs can no longer live on entitlements without obligations; they now have to earn their way in the marketplace like other people, and the nature of the market is to exact reciprocity. An individual can get what he wants from the market only by providing something of equivalent value to other parties. A worker must satisfy his employer, and the seller his customer. But the recipients face obligations only because
they are no longer recipients; the welfare state is reformed only to the extent it is done away with. There is little attempt to balance rights with obligations within the programs that remain. And most importantly, the conservative policy cannot be pursued far enough to solve the obligation problem since the major social programs enjoy too much support to be eliminated. The American people want to integrate the underclass and still go on helping those in need. They want the problem solved within the welfare state.

Federal planners have recognized the work problem in welfare but have tried to solve it with "work incentives" rather than explicit work requirements. The general idea has been that recipients would feel more interest in working if they could keep most of their earnings, rather than having them deducted from the grant. ⁷

The liberal approach, however, runs into such serious economic and moral dilemmas that we cannot say the obligation problem is solved. If earnings are taken less into account when calculating welfare grants, then people with much higher incomes remain eligible for assistance and the cost of welfare rises. Similarly, it costs much more to employ people in public jobs than to place the same number in lower-paying private openings. And both policies can be unfair since people receiving welfare or public employment can easily end up with more income or better jobs than the "working poor" who avoid dependency and accept available low-wage private-sector jobs. For these reasons, Congress has never fully accepted the incentives approach to work for welfare recipients. It rejected the reform proposals in 1969 and 1977, and last year accepted Reagan proposals that work incentives be reduced in order to concentrate welfare monies on the "truly needy." The main reliance since 1967 has been on administrative procedures that threaten, though ineffectively, to deny benefits to employable recipients who refuse work training.

The liberal error is to suppose that appeals to self-interest can solve a moral problem. The incentives approach assumes that recipients have, or can be made to have, sufficient reasons of their own to work. A correspondence is assumed to exist between the indi-

⁷ All the earnings of working AFDC recipients used to be deducted, but starting in 1968 only about two-thirds were. The Nixon welfare reform plan of 1969 and the Carter plan of 1977, both written by welfare planners of the executive branch, proposed to reduce the proportion to one-half. In a sense, the Carter public employment programs also appealed to the self-interest of recipients by trying to make work more attractive to the disadvantaged by offering them more appealing jobs in government than they could get in the private sector.
vidual and social interest in work. Now individuals certainly do have an interest in work if they have no other way to support themselves or if they can make much more by working than not. Once social programs exist, however, those meeting the eligibility rules have an alternative to work. And if they are low-skilled, they are unlikely to make much more by working than by going on relief (particularly if we consider the value of in-kind benefits such as free health care that are received by those on welfare). We could still make it in their interests to work if, as liberal policies would do, we let them work and receive welfare, or offered them more attractive jobs than they could command on their own. But then economy and fairness would be sacrificed.

The basic difficulty is that the individual and social interests in work do not coincide for much of the lower class once programs have been instituted to support them. To use an economic term, low-wage work is no longer a "private good," something the individual will seek spontaneously because it benefits him. Rather, it has become a "public good"—something in which society as a whole has an interest, for reasons of morals or social integration, but which may not serve the individual's interest. Like other public goods, it now has to be produced using government authority rather than through the dynamic of individual interest operating in the marketplace. Government must now obligate program recipients to work rather than just entice them. What is obligatory cannot simply be offered as a choice—it has to be enforced by sanctions, in this case loss of the welfare grant.

The anti-authoritative instinct

So it seems that administrative work tests, for all their flaws, are the right approach to obligation in welfare. They seem to be the only way to reconcile the public's desire to help the disadvantaged, with the need to support behavior necessary to integration. But to be effective work tests must be more authoritative than they are, and neither conventional ideology gives them the authority they need. Both are deeply individualistic. In different ways, each seeks to use only individual interest to motivate work. Neither accepts the need to levy obligations contrary to immediate individual interest in the name of a more inclusive social good, in this case social integration.

Most opposition to social obligation rests on simple opposition to federal authority. Federal social policies have always been the
most controversial in American politics since they have tried most deliberately to change American society. Liberals, accustomed to a permissive federal stance on social issues, would certainly resist any attempt to implement serious work requirements from Washington. Nor would most conservatives be inclined to support such efforts. Most conservatives think federal programs can only undermine traditional American values, not shore them up. Their inclination is to eliminate most federal social programs, not use them to set clearer standards for the disadvantaged.

But to a great extent, Americans would resist social obligations coming from any level of government, not just from Washington. American political culture simply gives little support in the social, as opposed to political, sphere to the juridical balance of claims between the individual and society. When the Constitution is invoked, when Americans think of the traditional political rights, they are usually ready to accept that corresponding obligations are necessary; they do not so easily accept the idea of public-defined obligations in the social area. Indeed, most people feel they are entitled to exploit government subsidies and benefits (including but not limited to social programs) for their own advantage, regardless of the collective consequences. They resist obligations linked to these programs, even though they incur the responsibilities only by first claiming the benefits.

In a sense, conservatives are wise to try to solve the obligation problem by returning recipients to the market rather than expecting things of them publicly. For most Americans, the market enforces obligations more legitimately than the government ever can. In the marketplace, one must work, not because some functionary says so, but because one must satisfy an employer's or customer's needs. The pressure to perform appears in an authentic and personal, not impersonal, form. But unfortunately, as we have seen, the market solution is incompatible with the public's desire to go on helping people in need.

Race and religion

In the U.S., an even stronger feeling has been that social programs must be liberal simply because so many (though far from all) of the disadvantaged are nonwhite. The pressures on recipients, that is, are believed to stem not only from the economic market but from a racist society. The claims of black Americans for redress of grievances underlie much of federal domestic policy. In some ways
they have given the welfare state in the U.S. an even more liberal cast than it has in Europe. There most programs tend to cover the whole population. In the U.S., most are means-tested but tend to be especially protective of racial minorities.

Sensitivity to the race question is one of the reasons for the general crisis in American public authority. Most American policy-makers recall with shame that American laws and institutions once required more of blacks than whites. Today, although the authorities often sincerely seek the advancement of blacks, the result in some ways has been simply to expect more of whites. Federal programs impose few behavioral requirements on blacks, but federal busing and affirmative action policies have required whites to make a more equal place for blacks in education and employment. And at the local level, the authorities in many cities have become more reluctant than they once were to confront crime and insist on traditional academic values in the schools, particularly in black areas. Their main fear has been that to do these things would "stigmatize" underclass blacks whose attachment to society is in question. Of course, most blacks are not underclass. They adhere to the same standards of public behavior as whites, and they often wish government would enforce greater order than it does. But given the past, black spokesmen most often oppose conservative policies, and government finds that it lacks the authority to act. Blacks' attitudes are not much different from whites' attitudes, but government sets substantially different standards for the two groups.

Finally, the idea of social obligation is blocked by ethical assumptions stemming from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The welfare state may be officially secular, but more than we realize, the moral sentiment that underlies it derives from a liberal interpretation of the Old and New Testaments. In the current view, the Biblical tradition identifies goodness simply with meeting the immediate needs of people in distress. The good man does not, in the words of Isaiah, put out the smoldering wick. Rather, in the image of Jesus, he is the friend of publicans and sinners, or the Good Samaritan who helps the victim of robbers. The liberal view that service to the poor is the touchstone of social justice may be stated in impersonal terms (as it is, for instance, in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*), but ultimately these religious images hover behind it.

The liberal view of Christian charity is not only solicitous of the poor, but anti-political in that it opposes the balancing of conflicting moral imperatives that is central to policymaking. It counsels such sensitivity to immediate human need that any compromise to serve
other values becomes intolerable. We cannot indulge in calculations, as policymakers must, that would weigh the interests of the poor against those of the overall economy. Our assistance to the poor must be unconditional; we cannot require anything of them in return, not even for their own good. We cannot even subordinate meeting their short-term desires to advancing their long-term welfare. Anything other than an unmeasured response to their immediate need is an evasion of the ethical imperative.

But the moral consequence of this view has simply not been addressed. It is that government benefits have begun to unhinge the civilities on which society depends for its coherence and energy. For dependent groups particularly, but also for Americans generally, social programs have brought closer the danger of which Tocqueville wrote, that "a kind of virtuous materialism may ultimately be established in the world, which would not corrupt, but enervate, the soul and noiselessly unbend its springs of action."

A doctrine of social obligation

If we believe that a measure of social obligation is essential to solve the problems of the disadvantaged, then these attitudes stand in the way of an effective welfare state. And those who believe in social obligation must begin to construct a rationale for it. This task is necessary, in large part, because of the poverty of American political thinking. Traditional American thought is largely bound up in long-standing legal and constitutional issues. Its agenda is to work out the details of the Founders' original design for a complex government of divided and limited powers. It has much to say about federalism, separation of powers, and civil liberties, but relatively little about the juridical issues raised by the welfare state, a comparatively recent development.

The general problem is that American political thinking supports people making demands on government, but not government levying obligations on people, particularly in the social realm. The Founders were alive to the dangers of tyranny, to the need for freedom from government; they had little to say about the dangers of dependency on government. American political reflexes will defend people against public policies that injure them through an excess of authority, but not those, like the current welfare state, that enervate through a deficiency of it.

More fundamentally, American thinking assumes that individuals are self-reliant and responsible for their own actions. The main
basis for political authority in the West is consent of the governed, and consent assumes that people are able to commit themselves to government and be held accountable for their subsequent behavior. Plenty of Americans break the law, but we allow government to proceed against them as long as they seem well-integrated in society. Middle-class crimes like tax evasion are serious, but they raise problems only of enforcement, not of public authority.

For the disadvantaged, however, whether individuals can be held accountable for their actions is precisely the issue. The very assumptions about social discrimination and acute need that surround the idea of disadvantage militate against assigning responsibility. Government is confused by these claims. It draws back from expecting all of the normal obligations of citizenship from underclass groups. That is why the problems of order most associated with the disadvantaged, including crime and work, are so intractable. We can obligate those who oppose society, but not those who drop out of it. We can handle disobedience, but not social deviance.

A doctrine of social obligation must maintain that individuals can be bound to discharge social responsibilities, such as work, just as they are to fulfill other responsibilities defined in law. Unpolitical claims of social vulnerability simply cannot be grounds for exemption from obligation if we seriously wish the disadvantaged to be integrated as equals.

The welfare state can be seen as the most significant recent political development in the West. We usually mean by political development the evolution of modern governmental institutions, such as democracy and bureaucracy, and of the public attitudes that support them. Most Western countries, however, are already highly developed in this sense. Americans, indeed, believe that their major institutions sprang full-blown into existence in 1787 and have needed no development since. But to the extent a welfare state exists, then social institutions of a quasi-public kind must also be developed. This the West has not achieved. Social programs have benefited people, but have not called forth from them the dutiful view of work and the other civilities necessary to make the welfare state a stable part of the social order.

In the U.S. particularly, the welfare state has become a kind of hole in the polity through which millions have dropped out of active involvement in American life. Since we wish to retain the programs, we can close the hole only by obligating the disadvantaged to function as other people do. We can make them equal only by extending the reach and the meaning of the American republic.