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A Monster of His Own Creation: Hearing Clinton Repeatedly Bad-Mouth Welfare Gave Credibility to the Program's Critics

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The Republican-controlled Congress is now in the final stages of producing a welfare reform bill that ends 60 years of guaranteed federal financial support to poor mothers and their children. It will mandate that most welfare mothers work or attend school for their benefits and will reduce federal support to the states while giving them a great deal more discretion in deciding who gets assistance and who does not.

How did we get to this point? Most people, whether they like or detest these radical changes, credit (or blame) the Republicans for them. But in fact, Bill Clinton is as responsible as the Republicans for what is happening to welfare in America.

It was Clinton who, as a candidate, single-handedly moved the welfare debate sharply to the right with his promise to "end welfare as we know it." Liberals could hear this wonderfully ambiguous phrase as a promise to improve the current system, and conservatives could hear it as a promise to dismantle it. But the overarching effect was to undercut support for the system among moderate voters. Hearing a Democrat repeatedly bad-mouth welfare gave credibility to the program's sharpest critics.

As he campaigned across the nation, Clinton introduced—and made politically acceptable—a radical idea: time-limited welfare. He said that welfare should "provide people with the education, training, job placement assistance and child care they need for two years—so that they can break the cycle of dependency. After two years, those who can work will be required to go to work, either in the private sector or in meaningful community service jobs."

Although Clinton was usually careful to repeat the entire formulation, most voters heard only a promise of "two years and they're out"—and he did little to dispel this misimpression.

After Clinton won in 1992, his campaign rhetoric was considered a stroke of political genius—allowing him to define himself as a New Democrat without alienating old-style liberals. Perhaps.

But Clinton's rhetoric had another effect. Before his campaign, no major Republican proposal

had even remotely suggested time-limiting welfare. Now, it is the core of the Republican bills passed by both the House and Senate.

Once in office, Clinton still had time to tone down his anti-welfare rhetoric and propose a more modest approach to welfare reform. But his White House staff seemed to have been lulled into complacency by the absence of public criticism from the social policy establishment.

During the presidential campaign, most welfare specialists said privately that the Clinton plan was wildly impractical and could hurt many poor families. But most of these specialists were also liberals who, after 12 years of Republican presidents, were eager to see a Democrat in the White House. So they collectively held their tongues.

After the election, their voices were stilled for another reason: Many of their leading lights were appointed to develop a plan that would implement Clinton's campaign promise. Surely, they whispered, the new team at Health and Human Services (HHS) could be trusted to fashion a plan that paid lip service to the campaign's rhetoric—without actually implementing it.

But instead of trying to finesse Clinton's rhetoric, his HHS team tried to turn his campaign slogan into a concrete program. Unfortunately, as the administration soon discovered, providing job training, public service jobs and guaranteed child care would more than double welfare expenditures—without appreciably reducing caseloads.

As a result, the actual plan, when it was finally released, fell of its own weight. But the HHS team inadvertently did something that a generation of conservatives had been unable to accomplish. By honestly laying out the true costs and limited benefits of job training and public service jobs, they exposed the impracticality of traditional liberal nostrums about reforming welfare.

Into this policy vacuum came the new Republican Congress. The year before, when they were in the minority and had little chance of being taken seriously, Republicans had proposed an even more expensive version of the Clinton plan. Now, in the majority and committed to reducing taxes while also balancing the budget, Republicans saw that a new multibillion-dollar federal welfare program of dubious promise was out of the question. Hence the idea of giving the program to the states and capping its growth.

But, everyone asks, why have so many governors accepted an approach that reduces federal support to the states? One answer is that the alternative would probably be worse. With both the Clinton plan and the earlier Republican plan still fresh in their minds, the governors know all too well that any other approach to welfare reform would likely cost them lots more.

No one can really predict what this new welfare regime will bring us. On the one hand, the spending cap and time limits could hurt many poor families. On the other hand, with the new freedom to experiment, states could uncover ways to break patterns of long-term dependency. But this tale has a larger moral:

"Ready, fire, aim" may be a good way to run a successful presidential campaign, but it's no way to make policy if you care about the final product (and the individuals affected). Before undercutting support for a controversial program, politicians should have a programmatically and politically viable substitute ready. And political loyalty should not keep experts from criticizing what they think are profoundly flawed proposals. Otherwise, both the politicians and the experts should be prepared to lose control of the unfolding policy process—and to see the program swept away by a tidal wave of unexpected developments. These days that's a good lesson for Republicans as well as Democrats.

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