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## Welfare As We Don't Know It

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

### Book Review

*TYRANNY OF KINDNESS: Dismantling the Welfare System To End Poverty in America*

By Theresa Funicello

Atlantic Monthly Press. 340 pp. \$23

BILL CLINTON has promised to "end welfare as we know it," by placing a two-year limit on welfare payments, after which single mothers must either get a job or accept public-service employment. Theresa Funicello, a former homeless welfare mother turned welfare advocate and, later, a welfare bureaucrat, disagrees. The problem is not welfare dependency, she argues, but low benefit levels.

Of all the books on poverty and welfare reform, it's refreshing to find one written by a former welfare recipient. Although Funicello might have spent more time describing what it takes to subsist on welfare - and less time settling old scores against various antagonists from her days as a welfare activist - she has written a book that reminds us that most welfare mothers are just that: mothers, taking care of their children.

Despite media stereotypes, the majority of women who go on welfare did not choose to live that way: They have been abandoned by the men to whom they entrusted their economic well-being. They want to work but cannot find jobs that would pay as much as their welfare benefits, and they take good care of their children under the most difficult conditions.

What's it like to deal with the welfare bureaucracy? Funicello tells us to "think of the worst experience we have ever had with a clerk in some government service job" and then magnify it many times because we face starvation or homelessness. "You wait and wait, shuttling back and forth in various lines like cattle to the slaughter. You want to wring the workers' necks, but you don't dare talk back. The slightest remark can set your case back hours, days, weeks, or forever. Occasionally someone loses it and starts cursing at the top of her lungs. Then she's carted away by security guards."

The first time that she used one of those little stoves in a welfare hotel, Funicello says, "I had just added eggs to the frying pan when swarms of roaches scrambled out of the fire in every direction, including right into the frying pan. It was days before I could bring myself to try it

again. The things most people take for granted become little horrors, each stacked on top of the one before."

Welfare mothers do not get much help from social agencies, according to Funciello. Incompetence and greed characterize the public welfare bureaucracies. And the large private agencies, the "mega-charities," as she calls them, line their pockets with money meant for the poor. In other words, "poor people get shafted on the taxpayers' dime."

Funciello pulls few punches. She accuses many people - all by name - of selling out, being "dull," "making corrupt funding decisions," being "unscrupulous," "taking legal kickbacks" and so forth. Programs are described as "diabolical," "fraudulent," "legal graft," etc. And the system as a whole is "racist and sexist."

And she asks: "Shouldn't we be just as angry about a child raised in foster care to the tune of \$50,000 annually who ages without being able to live independently as we were about the \$600 hammers procured by the military during the Reagan administration? Shouldn't we, in fact, be angrier?"

What welfare mothers do need is "less red tape, more money," argues Funciello. And we should respect the work that welfare mothers do in raising their children. Too much anti-poverty money goes to social workers and charitable institutions to try to "correct" the behavior of the poor. If, instead, all that money were simply given to the poor - in cash - they and society would be better off.

HER PROPOSAL is deceptively simple. If the reason single mothers are poor is that they have no money, give them more - \$14,000 a year in the form of a "guaranteed income" - and you'll wipe away poverty.

Funciello is absolutely right to be concerned about low benefit levels. No one would want to live on what welfare provides. But there is a clear link between higher benefits and greater welfare dependency.

Eighty-two percent of the single mothers who are on welfare remain dependent for five or more years. Most of these long-term recipients dropped out of school and had their first babies as unwed teenagers. How many more disadvantaged young women might be lured onto welfare by the promise of \$14,000 a year - just for having a baby?

Funciello brushes aside such concerns. "Cynics can chide me for being naive, but they cannot challenge the eminent reasonableness of a strategy to trust poor people just like we trust social security recipients and those who report to the IRS. The honor system."

Funciello cares deeply about meeting the material needs of single mothers - early on she warns that she does not "pretend to be `objective'." That is why she can cavalierly dismiss the negative

incentives that come with higher benefits. But a realistic plan to reform welfare cannot. It must achieve a workable balance, and that is the problem that has bedeviled policy makers for the past 30 years.

*Douglas J. Besharov was the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. His most recent book is "Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide for the Concerned."*