

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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**The New
American
Revolution**

*By Governor
Tommy Thompson*



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The New American Revolution

By Governor Tommy Thompson

In our day a revolution is being waged against bureaucracy, collectivism, and welfare dependency. This struggle for individual freedom and enterprise is occurring in Eastern Europe as well as in the Third World. Everywhere the dominance of socialist thinking is falling prey to reality. From Mexico City to Moscow the heresy of free trade and free markets is being openly preached on the streets and in the suites of the presidential palace.

The Socialist Welfare State. The chief political fact of our times is the death of the socialist idea. In the United States, the socialist idea has taken the form of the bureaucratic welfare state. Although the welfarists dreamt of a war on poverty resulting in a Great Society, the reality has been the devastation of our urban communities that were once strong and vibrant. The chief casualties of the war on poverty can be found in our central cities, where welfare is too often a way of life, and where the educational route to achievement is often too closed off.

That is why I want to address myself this evening to the ways I have been trying as Governor of Wisconsin to wage a revolution in our welfare and educational systems. Let us understand how welfare developed. Welfare came into existence in a society where women were generally unable to obtain decent paying jobs that would allow them to support a family. A widow, for instance, had very few options, and welfare was a compassionate response to her problems. But today that original vision of welfare has had its props knocked out for such reasons as the advent of the women's movement and the sexual revolution that made pre-marital sex and single-parent households much more acceptable. Today, we have a 1990s welfare program that is governed by 1930s sociology.

Our Founders envisioned a nation of free and independent, self-sufficient families, educated to play an active and intelligent role in public affairs. In contrast, welfare recipients are undermined by rules and regulations that turn them away from marriage, from earning an income, and from gaining an education. Our first task must be to rebuild the welfare system upon the three foundations of success in our society: home, work, and school. A significant part of this reconstruction is the re-establishment of the two-parent, self-sufficient family as the norm, and not the rare exception in poor neighborhoods. The "Parental and Family Responsibility Initiative" which we have introduced in Wisconsin would greatly aid in that effort by removing a major disincentive to marriage in the most disadvantaged areas.

Make Room For Daddy. Currently, a young man with no work history (not exactly unheard of in the inner city) will actually make the mother of his child financially worse off if he marries her, since both would then be ineligible for welfare. We want to change that. We want to "Make Room For Daddy," by allowing a young married couple to be eligible for welfare. But that is only the beginning. Our initiative would require that young couples get into the educational, parenting, and work training programs they need to get off welfare. Once employed, the father would be allowed to keep much more of his income without losing welfare benefits and plunging his family back into poverty. Our goal is simple: A self-sufficient, independent family that is off the treadmill of welfare and on the elevator of opportunity.

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For those young males who choose not to marry the mother of their children, we have a parental responsibility program called "Children First." It is very simple: we tell young fathers that they owe child support. If they have no job to make those payments, we will find them a job. If they do not like the job we find them, they have every incentive to find one that is more to their liking. The success rate of this program in one pilot community shows an increase of child support payments of 28 percent. In another program they increased a phenomenal 145 percent after six months.

As part of our vision of family responsibility, we want to take away the incentive welfare gives single, teenage mothers to have additional children. In effect, welfare gives young mothers a raise for each additional child. That is a policy not duplicated anywhere in the private sector, and it promotes the kind of behavior that society should be discouraging in these young women. We will continue to provide food stamps and health care for every individual on welfare, but we should no longer hand out additional cash for third, fourth, or fifth children. Such a cash incentive simply sends the wrong message to welfare mothers.

Breaking the Welfare Chains. But equally important are our efforts to change the attitude of the father. In every county in Wisconsin a comprehensive jobs program (a model for the federal governments's Family Support Act of 1988) should be strictly adhered to. This program provides remedial education, vocational training, work experience, and a whole range of similar programs aimed at freeing citizens from welfare. Over 57 percent of adult AFDC recipients in Wisconsin are participating in the jobs program. It acts as an important rescue operation for adults seeking to escape a life of welfare dependency.

Isn't it preferable to head off the children of welfare recipients before they also enter the welfare system as adults? This is the thinking behind Wisconsin's "Learnfare," or "tough love" program. We tell welfare recipients that they have an obligation to educate their children. And if they fail to meet that responsibility they will face reduced welfare payments. We also urge teenage mothers to accept an obligation to complete their high school education and we offer them the child care benefits they need to make this possible. Because of Learnfare over one thousand drop-outs are back in the classroom in Milwaukee. In the first two years of the program, 92 percent of Learnfare's teens complied with the school attendance requirement. We are trying to get Learnfare extended to younger children, to reach them before they develop the habit of skipping school.

We will continue to base our welfare programs on strengthening the home, getting people into the workplace, and giving them the education they need to get out of the welfare cycle. Clearly, there must be something to this approach. In 1990 Wisconsin was the only state in the nation to see a drop in welfare rolls. In fact, we have 46,000 fewer individuals on welfare than when I took office in 1987. I am proud of this record, and I am proud that Wisconsin has taken a leadership role on this issue.

Education Reform. But there is an even more important battle we must wage. Our victory is vital for the success of our nation's institutions. Wisconsin has taken the lead on education reform, and as with welfare we have built our reform around the traditional American principles of parental responsibility and local control, which allow for diversity while insisting on high standards.

As a start, we have extended to poor parents an important option which wealthy parents enjoy: the option of choosing where their children go to school. Our school choice program allows up to one thousand Milwaukee children to attend private, non-sectarian schools while mandating strong parental involvement in those schools. Our school choice program has restored power to parents.

Even our State's Department of Public Instruction, which bitterly opposed this policy, concluded in its evaluation that participating parents are happy with the education their children are receiving. The report from the Department of Public Instruction also showed that the program is having a marked affect in two areas it was designed to boost: student attendance and strong parental involvement in those schools. I am also pleased to report continued growth in this program. Three hundred forty-one students began the program during the 1991 school year. Currently we have 554 choice students enrolled in seven schools. I am proud of this program, but it is only a beginning.

"Enlighten the people generally," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day." So here in Wisconsin we are launching a comprehensive education package to make schools more accountable to parents, while simultaneously giving them more flexibility to educate our next generation. We will be setting clear goals for our schools. These goals will allow taxpayers to judge educational progress not by the amount of money going in, but by the skills mastered by the students coming out. A vital part of this reform consists of comprehensive, state-wide testing.

At the same time, we want to free schools so that they can create their own alternative compliance procedures for state mandates that might otherwise hinder local innovation. Finally, we want to refocus our school effort toward the next century and toward the marketplace. Our school-to-work transition programs are among our most important education reforms. We are instituting "Tenth Grade Gateway Assessment" which will ensure that high school students get the skills they need to excel in the marketplace.

In addition, we have launched a program called "Post-Secondary Enrollment Options" which allows high school seniors and juniors to enroll in either university or vocational courses, and thus get a head start on their futures. Other projects include the nation's first state-wide youth apprenticeship program and "Education for Employment Standards," a program which will prepare students for employment, foster cooperation between business and schools, and establish a new dynamic for involving our public schools in the process of economic development.

And to ensure that we continue to find the best means of preparing students for the workplace, I have created an Executive Cabinet for a quality workforce. The cabinet includes top members of my administration and representatives from business, labor and education, who will provide practical ideas for giving our children the marketplace skills they will need after they graduate.

A Conservative Revolution. These are a few examples of the issues that are creating a revolution in public policy in Wisconsin. While Washington continues to flounder in a sea of paper we are putting conservative ideas and policies into practice. And like all successful revolutions in history, it is a conservative revolution. Like the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and our American Revolution, our revolution is reclaiming traditional freedom and values from a rapacious central government. Our revolution is built upon the experience of America in the years before the bureaucratic welfare state grew so tangled and so constricting. It rests squarely upon the proven foundations of American greatness: free enterprise, family values, and self sufficiency. Liberalism has had its chance to build an America on different values, and the wreckage of that liberal dream is there for all to see.

And so I say it is no longer our task to "Stand athwart history, yelling 'Stop!'" as it was when *National Review* was founded over thirty-five years ago. Today it is our task and our opportunity to stand upon the brink of a new era, yelling "Charge!"

