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Will Survive:
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Or the
Republican
Revolution?

By Senator John Ashcroft



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Which Will Survive: The Welfare State or the Republican Revolution?

By Senator John Ashcroft

It is an honor to be speaking at The Heritage Foundation. This organization, founded on the solid principles of a limited government and an unlimited America, is rightfully America's foremost think tank.

As we gather here today, we do so at two important milestones: first, on the eve of one of the most significant public policy debates of the modern era; second, on the eve of the congressional mid-summer break. I would like to take a few minutes this afternoon to assess the state of the revolution more than halfway through the first session of the 104th Congress and to speak to the profound and immense challenges now facing the Republican Party as the welfare debate unfolds.

I am as convinced as ever that last fall's unprecedented election was about more than voter anger and frustration. I am convinced that it was a call to responsibility for an arrogant national government that, for more than a generation, has repudiated the most basic laws and principles of our democratic society—repudiating what can be called our nation's "survival values," the foundation that is our heritage.

These survival values are not a narrowly defined, partisan, sectarian set of values; they are the essential elements of our common creed. They are familiar to all of us—responsibility, opportunity, community, mobility, and family. They are uniquely American and have allowed the huddled masses to rise from the ranks of the outcast to the ranks of the affluent, opening a golden door of opportunity to any who would enter. But for 30 years, these survival values have been explicitly repudiated by Washington's willful arrogance. For all of its good intentions, Washington has replaced responsibility with rights, opportunity with entitlements, community with handouts, mobility with dependency, and family with government.

Washington has sent the message that fiscal irresponsibility, unrestrained spending, and never-ending deficits are acceptable for government, engendering a belief that irresponsibility is acceptable at the personal level as well.

Washington has said that what children know is not finally as important as how they feel, robbing generations of the foundation of basic knowledge and the nobility of service to others.

Washington has said that the criminal is the victim and the victim the criminal, unleashing a torrent of violence against America, and especially America's poor.

Washington has promoted welfare programs which encourage illegitimacy, discourage work, mock marriage, and require dependence, consigning generations to hopelessness and despair.

Senator John Ashcroft, a Republican, represents Missouri in the United States Senate.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on August 4, 1995.

ISSN 0272-1155 © 1995 by The Heritage Foundation.

It was to the Republican Party that the American people turned last fall as they sought someone to help restore the survival values repudiated by the last three decades of government behavior and programs. Our party has begun that task in earnest. We have moved in the right direction by passing a balanced budget resolution which signals to the public the right message of integrity and responsibility; by passing a crime bill in the House that begins to restore justice to an unjust system which devalues human life; and by having the House pass an education reform bill that restores to states the right to demand educational achievement rather than self-indulgent feel-good programs that teach baseless self-esteem.

As important as these accomplishments are, I believe they will be seriously compromised if we fail to fundamentally dismantle and replace the current Washington-based, one-size-fits-all, micromanaged welfare system. Our efforts and our ability to replace welfare will be viewed by the American people and by history as a measure of our commitment to restoring our survival values, a bright line in our public life between cheap talk and real action. It is easy to call for a revolution, much more difficult to achieve its promise. But that is the difference between administration and leadership. The American people want leadership.

Across the world, our enemy for nearly 50 years no longer exists—the result not of a conquering enemy from without, but a defeat from forces within. What communism did to the Soviet Union is not unlike what welfare threatens to do to America; it stifled her spirit, lulled her into dependence, and compromised her greatness. Our danger today is to not recognize the threat, to believe that doing anything, so long as we do something, is sufficient. If that occurs, Republicans will have failed, the welfare state will have survived, our pathologies will metastasize, and an America that today stands on the brink of chaos will tomorrow be thrown into an abyss of mayhem.

In 1965, a young Assistant Secretary of Labor named Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote,

From the wild Irish slums of the 19th century Eastern seaboard to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American history: A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any rational expectations about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. In such a society crime, violence, unrest, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure—these are not only to be expected, they are very nearly inevitable.

Words of warning 30 years ago are now a jarring description of reality in modern America.

Statistically, the America that concerned him then is no match for the America in which we now live. Then, the illegitimacy rate hovered around 8 percent overall—about 4 percent for whites, 28 percent for blacks. Today, the overall illegitimacy rate approaches 30 percent—about 23 percent for whites, nearly 70 percent for blacks. If current trends continue, and it appears that they will, every other child born in America will be illegitimate by the year 2000.

In 1965, about 11 percent of all families with children were single-parent families. Today, that number is dangerously close to one in three American families. Of those homes, approximately 90 percent are homes without a father. According to certain projections, only 6 percent of black children and 30 percent of white children born in 1980 will live with both parents through age 18. To put it in perspective, for children born in 1950, 52 percent of black children and 81 percent of white children lived with both parents through age 18.

The situation we now find ourselves in is one unprecedented in human history. And it is a situation best understood not in statistics, but in human faces—in the balance sheet of human lives. During the past week, I have been going to the Senate floor every evening to talk about some of these stories. All of them come from reporting in the mainstream press. All of them are profoundly disturbing.

For instance, there is the story of a five-month-old girl named Ariel Hill. She was born on Christmas Eve 1992 and killed in May of 1993. She lived with her 22-year-old mother and father and four other siblings in a squalid one-bedroom apartment in public housing. The family's principal source of income was welfare. One day, her mother grew tired of her screaming, placed her in a sink, and burned her with hot water. She had not been fed in days. She died weighing less than seven pounds. When investigators examined the apartment they found a scrap of paper with each child's name on it and the dollar amount that they were worth on welfare. A life reduced to the dollar amount of a welfare check. When lives are valued for the dollars that they bring in, what has become of our survival values?

There is also the story of Ernesto Ventura. He is at least the fourth generation of a welfare family that includes about 80 welfare recipients and takes up nearly \$1 million a year annually in welfare funds. The family and most of its members have given up hope of finding a way out of the welfare dependency maze. At the time of his abuse, his mother was 26, pregnant, and the mother of six children by five different fathers. She was a drug addict supported by welfare and neglecting her children. One night she grew angry at Ernesto and plunged his hands in boiling water. She waited three weeks before seeking treatment. The paramedics found him lying on a bare mattress covered with his own blood and excrement. A life trapped in a web of cultural dependence. When generations live and die in perpetual welfare, what has become of our survival values?

Unfortunately, there are hundreds of stories like these. They are tragic and they are very difficult to talk about. But as difficult as it is, I believe that these stories are even more important than the statistics. They reveal the cold, hard realities of a cruel system that must be dismantled and replaced. The standard against which reform must be judged is not some utopian ideal, but the system that helped give us Ariel Hill and Ernesto Ventura.

These are the faces and stories that we must remember as Congress turns to welfare. Unbelievably, these are not the faces and stories of people victimized by a malevolent system, but the faces of people victimized and traumatized by benevolence—by good intentions. If our current system had been designed by a foreign enemy intent on our destruction, it could not have been any worse. We need more than good intentions. Our goal must not be to feel good about ourselves in passing something; our goal must be to do good by those who are suffering daily. Our danger is not to be found in being too bold, but in being too timid in defense of our values. It is not in reaching for the ideal; it is in compromising for the conventional to the detriment of the needy. Half-measures and rhetorically powerful reform are not enough. This is a system that must be replaced.

So when the Senate turns to welfare tomorrow, how can we tell whether it is enacting real reform? Let me lay out a five-part test.

First, we must end welfare as an entitlement. The notion that people should receive federal welfare benefits even if they do not work, even if they abuse their children, is a failed and pernicious notion. Real reform will end welfare's entitlement status. It will free people from the shackles of governmental dependence to embrace the responsibility and opportunity that are the hallmarks of America's survival values. Anything less is a retreat.

Second, we must radically limit Washington's intermeddling, micromanaging, counterproductive control of welfare. For 30 years, our welfare system has been premised on the belief that Washington knows best. It has prescribed a one-size-fits-all system that, in reality, fits none. The bureaucracy has levied a sort of tax upon the poor, taking up money and preventing it from reaching those in need. Real reform means Washington's oversight of welfare should end. Instead, funds should be distributed directly from the Department of the Treasury to the states and monitored by an independent auditor agreed upon by both a state's governor and the Secretary of the Treasury. Anything less will ensure that those who have crafted our current welfare system will be around to "manage" whatever modifications this Congress makes. Anything less is a retreat.

Third, we must encourage a national debate on illegitimacy while simultaneously doing all we can to ensure that illegitimacy is reduced. Most of the problems surrounding welfare can be tied, in one form or another, to illegitimacy. It is at the root of the family's breakdown in the inner city; it is tied to everything from educational failure to crime; it is the lifeline of dependency. Much progress has been made in recognizing it for the evil that it is. We must encourage further debate and discussion of it. At the same time, we also need to send a clear and strong signal that reducing illegitimacy is a priority of any reform. Anything less is a retreat.

Fourth, we must not fall into the trap of believing that laws alone will solve our welfare problems. As we all know from our experience in the drug wars, passing a law is one thing, changing habits something entirely different. In this fight, the Senate needs to enlist private and religious charitable organizations. These groups have a character entirely different from that of governmental entitlement. Theirs is the character of concern and compassion. Government's is one of sterile indifference. We need more of the former and less of the latter. Anything less is a retreat.

Last, we must realize that unanimous reform is seldom real reform. In 1988, we passed the Family Support Act. It passed by a vote of 98-1. It tried to be all things to all people. We have seen that it is detrimental to all. These are enormously difficult and divisive issues; genuine efforts at solution do not lend themselves to unanimity.

Today, senior Republicans will be introducing a bill that falls short of the tests we have discussed. We cannot fall short. We must call our nation to greatness. We must signal that ideas and principles are more powerful than Washington's politics and pragmatism. We must refuse to compromise the revolution without ever trying to retake our city on the Hill. We cannot settle for being rhetorically impressive while simultaneously being substantively lacking. Half-measures which tinker at the margins are predestined to fail. We can and we must do better. The debate in the hours to come will be interesting and it will be contentious, but it is a debate we must have.

Some of the tests that I lay down are controversial. Some might call them radical, others nonsensical. But if they are radical, it is only because the magnitude of suffering is unrivaled and unprecedented in American history. In these circumstances, half-measures and self-deception are a form of betrayal against the poor.

For 30 years, Washington has repudiated and rejected the proven values of our history. We have come to discover that these values are not traditional values; the testimony of our times reveals them to be our survival values. We stand prepared to reclaim them today, and the nation cries out for our leadership. Our resolve will be tested in the hours to come on a debate we must have. I believe we are up to the task.