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Kicking America's
Welfare Habit:
Politics,
Illegitimacy,
And Personal
Responsibility

*By The Honorable Pete Wilson
Governor of California*



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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
U.S.A.
202/546-4400

Kicking America's Welfare Habit: Politics, Illegitimacy, And Personal Responsibility

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It's a pleasure to be back at Heritage. Your willingness to hear from the nation's governors is just one bit of evidence that this institution has the wisdom—all too rare in this town—to know that Washington does not have a monopoly on good ideas.

The American people are fed up with an arrogant and out-of-touch federal government. That is what fueled the ballot box rebellion of 1994. Yet, despite the enormous success of the House Republicans in delivering on the Contract with America, voters remain deeply cynical about Washington's ability to make change. In fact, a poll done last week by *USA Today* showed voters' faith in Congress at an historic low. Why? Well, I can't think of a better example of what fuels voter cynicism about Washington than the status of welfare reform.

The American people are justifiably outraged by a federal welfare system that contradicts their values. It penalizes work, discourages marriage, and encourages illegitimacy. A foreign power bent on ruining America could not have designed a more destructive system than the one Washington has imposed on the American people. That's why in 1992, a candidate who promised to "end welfare as we know it" held such appeal for many voters. But what we have seen since has only deepened their contempt for D.C.

Bill Clinton has been President for almost a thousand days, three quarters of it with heavy Democratic majorities in Congress. How far has he gotten on his pledge? Well, he spent \$33 billion of the taxpayers' money on "welfare as we know it." Nearly a million more people have enrolled in "welfare as we know it." And today, 600,000 more children are living on "welfare as we know it."

But Bill Clinton hasn't changed one word of federal law to "end welfare as we know it." Not one. Cal Ripken isn't the only guy with a streak still going strong. Every day Bill Clinton sits in the Oval Office, he's still not ending welfare as we know it. He's extending welfare, and he knows it.

Voters understand that it is possible to change welfare. Millions of them—in states as diverse as Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and California—have seen their governors do it, often with bipartisan support, often with limited resources, and often despite lawsuits from the welfare defenders. In California, I have reduced welfare grants by 20 percent, saved the taxpayers \$9 billion, doubled the number of welfare recipients at work, and insisted that teenage parents on welfare live in their parents' home, that parents get the check and the girl stay in school to learn the skills that will let her and her child escape welfare.

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By contrast, the federal model of welfare simply provides a welfare check to an unwed child-mother—who is too young to get a driver's license—so she can move out to her own apartment. How utterly irresponsible. Then she is even more accessible prey to the next man seeking a junior-high-school, one-night-stand romance. It does not have to be that way. People can escape welfare. But it takes work, and it happens one person at a time. A great example is Trish Molina.

I met Trish Molina in California's Riverside County after she graduated from our successful welfare-work program known as GAIN. She got an entry-level job at a small wireless cable company. She has since been promoted three times. Today, she's the assistant to the head of the company. She's happy. She loves her career. She just needed the skills and discipline to take a job and stick with it. Most important, the job is not just helping her; it's helping her children. They now have the example of a mother who gets up every morning and goes to work, teaching them what it means to accept responsibility for yourself and contribute to your community.

The young mother says that now that she's working, she respects herself—and her children respect her, too. That is why we need welfare reform that demands personal responsibility, encourages work, and discourages irresponsible behavior. Yet President Clinton has not only failed to make significant welfare reform in Washington; he has actually blocked states like mine that are trying to make that change.

At a meeting of the nation's governors, President Clinton promised to approve welfare waivers in 90 days or less, whether he agreed with the changes or not. In California, we sought a federal waiver for one reform we wanted to make to reduce welfare grants and make work more attractive than welfare. That was over a year ago, and the Clinton Administration continues to delay it at a cost to taxpayers of \$3 million a week.

We have sought another waiver since November. This one would allow us to end the practice of giving larger and larger welfare checks to women who have more and more children while already on welfare. We think it is simply wrong to reward that kind of irresponsible behavior. Working families don't get an automatic pay raise when they have more children, so why should women on welfare? And why should a young couple working and saving to have a child be taxed to subsidize that welfare mother's irresponsibility?

It seems simple enough to me, but it took the Clinton Administration months to respond to our request. Then, in twisted logic that could only make sense to Washington, the Clinton Administration decided we could stop rewarding adults for having more and more children on welfare—but they insisted we had to continue rewarding teenagers for the same irresponsible behavior.

Well, I've got news for them: Having more and more children on welfare is wrong, whether you're an adult or a teenager. That's why I refuse to accept this absurd condition from President Clinton. Today, I am rejecting President Clinton's half-baked waiver and insisting that he live up to his promise: Mr. President, grant this waiver and every other waiver California has requested as you promised you would, with no strings attached. It's what you promised the American people. Have the guts to keep your word.

Unfortunately, like a lot of voters, I'm skeptical he will.

Bill Clinton's continued failure to reform welfare is why action in the Congress is so important. Congress is our last best hope for real reform. When the House passed welfare reform in less than 100 days, a skeptical public was given a glimmer of hope that things might really be changing in Washington. But then, welfare reform landed in the Senate.

More and more, the Senate looks like the graveyard for the Contract with America: on the Balanced Budget Amendment, on tax cuts, on the crime bill, and now on welfare reform. The Senate's continued delay holds states hostage to the whims of Bill Clinton's welfare bureaucrats. We are compelled to wrench reform from hostile guardians of the status quo.

Worse yet, the compromises being cut in the Senate raise serious doubts as to whether the Senate Republican Leader really understands the mandate voters gave us last November to make drastic change. There has been plenty of hot rhetoric on the Senate floor about freeing states from federal mandates, but under the Dole welfare compromise, states would be denied the chance to make even the most basic decisions. In many cases, Senator Dole would simply leave us with a watered-down version of current law.

For example, Senator Dole's compromise would continue to set the minimum level a state must spend on welfare. A similar, so-called "maintenance of effort requirement" in current law is what is preventing me from saving taxpayers \$3 million a week. Why would a Republican committed to fundamental change support a federal mandate like that? Congress has no business dictating terms like that to the states. California is a proud and sovereign state, not a colony of the federal government.

In another concession to Senate liberals, Senator Dole has agreed to extend federal disability benefits to individuals whose only disability is self-inflicted drug and alcohol abuse. Today, nearly 100,000 individuals collect such benefits, and the number grew nearly six-fold in five years. But why should that surprise us? What alcoholic would pass up a chance to have the taxpayers pick up his bar tab?

That's why the House welfare bill ended this absurd practice next month. The budget I just signed would end these benefits on the same day, but Senator Dole's bill would force us to continue paying these benefits for more than a year. In California alone, that would cost taxpayers more than \$1 million a week. That is not only an insult to taxpayers; it's an outrage for the federal government to be subsidizing someone's addiction. As the head of one homeless shelter described it, it is "suicide on the installment plan."

It's wrong and it's got to stop.

Yet, even as Senator Dole is imposing these indefensible mandates on the states, he is ignoring the one crisis that deserves national attention—the epidemic of out-of-wedlock teen births. Today, one in three children is born out of wedlock. In some of America's largest cities, more children are born to unmarried women than into two-parent families. And the 14-year-old girl who becomes an unwed mother is all too likely to give birth to a girl who will become a 14-year-old unwed mother herself, or a boy who will become a 14-year-old triggerman for a drug gang.

If Senator Dole is truly concerned about the crisis of values in America, he should not be content with talking about the perverse values promoted by our popular media. He should start doing something about the perverse values promoted by the federal welfare system. The Contract with America included many reforms we have made in California to stem this crisis of illegitimacy. It stops rewarding women with bigger welfare checks for having more and more children out of wedlock. Yet Senator Dole excluded this important change from the Senate version of the bill. He was unwilling to include this fundamental reform.

It is not leadership to settle for less than the fundamental change we need by cutting deals which compromise our values. We must demand nothing less than the courage and conviction to make fundamental change in policy if we are to have any hope of changing a tragically permissive culture. America deserves better, and must demand it.

If we make these changes, we will free millions of Americans from the chains of dependency that stifle opportunity. We will renew the dream of a nation where work is respected and rewarded and where rights are balanced by responsibility.

The biggest mistake we can make is to be too timid in our reforms. The task we face is great, but we dare not miss this opportunity. It may not come again soon.