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Marriage and the Welfare of America: The Tenth Anniversary of Welfare Reform

The Honorable Mike Leavitt

Thank you all for being here today. I am a deep admirer of Ed Feulner, and also of the Heritage Foundation and your constant reminder to us all of the importance of principles that made our nation great: free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.

I'm proud to be here today to represent those views and values, and my preparation has recalled some wonderful memories of the subject I'm going to talk about today.

The year was 1994. I was at the time the governor of Utah, and I had been elected by my colleagues as the Vice Chairman of the Republican Governors' Association.

There were 19 of us at that time. Ten days following the November election of that year, I was elected the Chairman of the Republican Governors' Association, but at that point, there were 29 of us. Oh, the difference that an election makes!

Not only had the election produced an increase of 10 Republican governors, but it had produced—for the first time in decades—a Republican majority in the House of Representatives and a Republican majority in the Senate.

As the incoming Chairman, I had the responsibility to choose both the place we would meet after the election and the theme that we would pursue.

We chose Williamsburg because of a passion that I thought was collectively felt among the Republican

Talking Points

- Welfare reform has brought about a quiet revolution in personal empowerment over the past 10 years that continues today.
- Even with the remarkable successes, there is still work to do. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 encourages states to engage the remaining number of adult TANF recipients in work-related activities to move them up the economic ladder.
- Five years ago, President Bush launched his Healthy Marriage Initiative to strengthen marriage and to strengthen family.
- The Deficit Reduction Act provided funding to help couples access marriage education services, on a voluntary basis, where they can develop the skills and the knowledge necessary to sustain healthy marriages.

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governors to revisit the value and the importance of federalism. We gathered there where a previous Revolution had been started 217 years earlier by a group of Virginia patriots, and we began a discussion after the election about a revolutionary idea. It was the idea of devolving power back to the states.

Because the election had been such a profound event—almost unexpectedly profound—it was the first moment where the governors, now 29 strong, and the Congress, both in the House and the Senate, gathered collectively. Newt Gingrich brought his new leadership team; Bob Dole brought his team; and the governors gathered. We were all there for the first time since the election.

On the third day of our gathering, I believe, before dawn, I walked the historic section of Williamsburg with then Speaker-elect Newt Gingrich. Now, Newt is by training and by instinct a teacher, and he could not resist commenting about the history as we walked.

It was a rich experience for me to hear his reflections about the formation of our government. As we walked past the House of Burgesses, he told me about how the colonial governor had refused to have any discussion of revolution at that point or in that place.

And so the group got up and left—the group included Washington and Madison and Jefferson—and they marched together down to Bruton Parish Church where they continued their meeting, and then they went on to the Raleigh Tavern where, I suspect, they sealed their decisions.

The two of us on that day walked along the same path. Because it was well before dawn, there was a low-hanging fog. It was almost dream-like. It just felt like James Madison was going to step out of the mist at any second.

Agenda for Devolution

But as we walked, and as we talked about the birth of a new nation and the sacrifice that it required at places like Lexington and Valley Forge and Bunker Hill, we also began to talk about the opportunity that lay in front of us, of our good fortune to be able to serve at that time, and the chance to change the direction of our country in a fundamental way.

That meeting at Williamsburg set an agenda. It was a dramatic and a historic devolution of power back to the states on the subject of welfare. Over the ensuing two years, history was made. In 1996 welfare reform became law.

So, I am especially pleased to be here today with you to reflect back, and also to look forward on this, the tenth anniversary of the passage of welfare reform.

During that period of time, I made 30 trips to Washington. It was an intense period of discussion. I was not alone; there were many other governors. I think it may have been among the most effective collaborations between states and Congress at any time—in my recollection or knowledge, at least.

The Heritage Foundation played an invaluable role in those discussions. You helped the bill in 1996, and it occurs to me today how important it is that you're still here, and that you will move forward with the spirit of welfare reform and the spirit of devolution, the spirit of those basic principles of federalism.

Why? Because almost everyone who was involved in that discussion in 1994, 1995, and 1996 has now moved to different parts of their lives. But this institution remains, and I just want to challenge you and the Foundation in its continued role to stand tall, as you always have and as you always will.

Today, I want to focus my remarks in three ways:

- First, I'd like to, for context, review the successes that have occurred over the course of the past ten years.
- Second, I'd like to discuss what President Bush called the "unfinished business" of welfare reform; he addressed this when he signed the Deficit Reduction Act. That unfinished business relates to new provisions of the TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) law that was part of the reauthorization and the funding for the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative. Together, both components represent a critical mid-course correction that keeps the focus just where it needs to be: on work and the value of marriage in society.

- I also want to address how the Healthy Marriage Initiative that the President has proposed holds great promise for the advancing of welfare reform to a new level, and offers hope for poor Americans, especially poor children in America.

A Quiet Revolution

I'd like to start by just reflecting back.

Welfare reform stands as a signal achievement, in my judgment, in social reform policy. The TANF act brought significant improvements in the lives of many Americans by helping them break the cycle of dependency and encouraging them to pursue self-sufficiency. It caused a quiet revolution in personal empowerment, and it continues to this very day.

Since 1996:

- Welfare rolls have declined by 57 percent.
- Fewer families are on welfare than at any time since 1969.
- Employment among single mothers has increased dramatically, reaching 63 percent today, the highest level ever.
- Child support collections have nearly doubled.
- Nearly a million and a half fewer children live in poverty than a decade ago. Child poverty among African-Americans has declined from 40 percent to 33 percent; among Hispanics, from 40 percent to 29 percent.
- We are also beginning to see a modest reduction in out-of-wedlock births among African-Americans, and among all low-income teenage girls.

Lives Transformed

I had the privilege of not only seeing this law passed, but being governor during the first five years and beyond of its implementation. I saw example after example of lives it transformed—not systems, but lives.

The best way to measure the success of a welfare effort like this is not in numbers or in the percentages, but in the human terms of those lives.

A person very similar to many that I met during my time as governor is Brenda. Brenda is a single

parent of two children. She was back on welfare after losing her job. She was discouraged, she had been living in poverty, and she felt hopeless about the future. She was even teased by her family; in fact, she herself said that she had been on welfare so long that they ought to put her face on the food stamps.

She said that without encouragement and without the support from Employment Services in her state, she'd still be collecting welfare. Brenda secured a full-time job; she worked first as a receptionist for three years. She has been working at the same organization for that entire period of time. She has accepted two promotions, and she values deeply the stability that it's provided her life and for her family. She was able to buy a car and ultimately bought a home. Brenda was able to live the American dream.

The stability of her employment has contributed not only to her own success, but also to the success of her children. Her oldest child graduated from high school with honors by following the example of a good mother moving forward.

Brenda's job has motivated her to improve her health; she lost 90 pounds in that time.

This is a powerful influence: the sense of freedom that comes of self-sufficiency is a powerful influence in the lives of us all.

Unfinished Business

Now there's unfinished business, as I've indicated. So stunning were the achievements of welfare reform that there is a tendency to think that the job might be done, but it's not.

We've had huge caseload reductions, and those caseloads have been so large that, in many respects, they've overshadowed the reality that there are still many, many families that are trapped in government dependency and are not being challenged to find work. By 2004, less than a third of the TANF adult caseload was fully meeting the requirement for work.

Last year—this is a statistic that will startle you—on average, states reported that nearly 60 percent of able-bodied adult TANF recipients had not participated in even a single hour of activity related to work or preparing for work over the course of a month. Nearly 60 percent!

Even before the original TANF legislation expired in 2002, President Bush was pushing for improvements in work requirements and calling for more attention to the subject of marriage. The President was concerned about the progress of welfare reform. He was concerned that it may have stalled, and that the Senate was unable to move it forward.

Many observers have said that the President's goals of improving work were too difficult to achieve. I must tell you that we heard exactly that criticism in 1994, in 1995, and in 1996. But, we persevered, and you can see the results.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 encourages states to engage the remaining number of adult TANF recipients in work-related activities to move them up the economic ladder.

The Deficit Reduction Act goes far beyond just reauthorizing TANF for another five years. It requires once again that states engage at least half of the TANF recipients in productive work activities. You might say we've rebooted the system, and we are starting welfare reform all over again.

The law also requires states to include adult recipients receiving cash welfare in a separate state program when they calculate their work participation requirements. This applies if the state expenditures are counted against the maintenance of effort requirement, again under the TANF program.

In addition, the law authorizes HHS to regulate how states define work. The original TANF legislation allowed states to be over-generous, I might suggest, in calculating the work participation rates.

For example, an August 2005 report of the Government Accountability Office found that many states had listed some peculiar definitions of what constituted work:

- Bed rest was defined as work in some states;
- Physical rehabilitation, which could include massage or regular exercise;
- Activities such as personal journaling and motivational reading and weight loss promotion, all worthy activities, but not necessarily within the category of work.

Needless to say, I think we can all agree we need to have a better definition of what constitutes work.

HHS is going to be issuing an interim final regulation later this month, and I hope that the Heritage Foundation will continue to add its voice to this debate and to support real reforms, as it has always done. This type of regulation and rule will create motivation and it will require change, but it's change that will improve the lives not just of states, but also of those whom we intend this to serve.

Promoting Healthy Marriages

The other piece of unfinished business on welfare reform involves the renewed efforts of promoting healthy marriages.

As you'll remember, in 1996, the legislation brought back an important word that had been missing from welfare policy for a long time; that word was marriage.

That legislation set national goals to reduce out-of-wedlock births and to strengthen the two-parent family. It also granted states freedom to use a portion of the TANF program to promote marriage.

The connection between marriage and the health of the society became very evident to me during the time that I was governor. As a governor, you begin to see the reflection of what occurs when society doesn't value marriage.

For years, people like Daniel Patrick Moynihan had warned about the structural breakdown of the family—what it would do in aggregate to our economy and to our social and educational disparities, particularly where African-Americans were concerned.

Since passage of welfare reform in 1996, we've made progress, but the evidence is mixed. In 1995, the percentage of black children born out of wedlock hit 70 percent. It has dropped every year since, but only to 68.5 percent in 2000, and to 68.2 percent in 2002. Still work to do.

On the other hand, more adults—black and white—are choosing to have children outside the protective bonds of marriage.

In any discussion of marriage and public policy, we need to recognize that some marriages fail, and

for reasons that are hard to control. We also need to understand that in these situations, many single parents make heroic efforts, often with success, to raise their children well and to keep them the priority they deserve to be. As President Bush has said, “The hardest job in America is to be a single mom....”

At the same time, the retreat from marriage across the board does not bode well for children as a whole. One in three children goes to bed every night without the benefit of a father in their home.

Why does that concern us? It concerns us because, as a whole, children do best when they grow up in a stable family with two, continuously married parents.

- All things being equal, they do better academically.
- They are half as likely to have emotional or behavioral problems.
- They are less likely to use illegal drugs, drink alcohol, or smoke tobacco.
- They are less likely to be physically abused, less likely to suffer physical neglect, and less likely to suffer emotional neglect.
- And, finally, children in two-parent families are seven times less likely to live in poverty.

Five years ago, President Bush launched his Healthy Marriage Initiative to strengthen marriage and to strengthen family.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 furthered those efforts. It furthered those efforts by redirecting, in a cost-neutral way, a small portion of the TANF program funds to be able to focus on this very important priority.

For several years, HHS has been funding healthy marriage initiatives through several different funding streams, but the Deficit Reduction Act provided funding as a dedicated funding stream. This funding helps couples access marriage education services, on a voluntary basis, where they can develop the skills and the knowledge necessary to sustain healthy marriages.

Without adding a single penny to the federal budget, the Deficit Reduction Act makes \$500 million available over the next five years to community- and

faith-based organizations, as well as to federal, state, and local governments for healthy marriage projects. The Deficit Reduction Act also makes \$250 million available over the next five years for activities to promote responsible fatherhood.

Our efforts are focused on three priorities:

- First, building Strong Families by focusing on unmarried parents who are actively contemplating getting married.
- Second, supporting Healthy Marriages by increasing access to marital education for low-income couples that have already been married.
- And, lastly, strengthening Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives by soliciting support from entire communities to help couples be able to sustain healthy marriages.

The research is undeniable; it shows that marriage education is indeed effective, and our demonstration projects have hit a responsive chord among low-income couples.

There is a direct imperative and direct connection between the health of marriages and the health of a nation. Examples of healthy marriage initiative success are all around us. There is a program in Alabama, for example, that works with low-income, mostly African-American mothers and fathers to teach individual, relationship- and decision-making skills.

One of the participants, from Mobile, reports, “We’ve been to other programs that have helped us with the baby and that’s been great. But this is the first time that we’ve gotten the chance to talk about us, and how we get along, and how we can be strong together. We know that working on that is really good for the baby, too.”

I visited a home with the First Lady, Mrs. Bush, where we had a chance to speak with a large number of African-American young men who had fathered children. One had fathered one, another had fathered two children—they were all under 18 years of age. None of them had any connection to a family that included a father.

Mrs. Bush had reached out, looking for ways to fund an organization that was helping them to learn the importance of fatherhood and marriage. It

is not an ethic that they had internalized, and that's true of people across various races, ethnic, and religious circumstances.

This is a very important part of how we continue to see momentum toward the principle of self-reliance, caring for those who are needy but teaching and fostering the value of self-reliance.

Hope for a Better Future

Two pillars of welfare reform are TANF work requirements and a Healthy Marriage Initiative; they represent wise policies. As President Bush has said, they are public policies that will “make a dif-

ference in the character of our country.”

Strengthening new provisions in this law, these two policies will have great promise, in my judgment, for helping less fortunate people in our society. They offer men and women the tools that they need to escape government dependency while forming and sustaining healthy marriages. Most importantly, they offer the children in our country hope for a better future. That's good for America as well.

—*The Honorable Mike Leavitt is U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services.*