Welfare Reform is the Acid Test

August 24, 1995 by Phyllis Schlafly

If the election of a Republican Congress in 1994 meant anything significant, it meant that the American people want Big Government reduced and also want big changes in the way government spends the money it does have.

The welfare bill is the acid test. President Clinton struck a chord with the American people when he said we should "end welfare as we know it," but the ball is in the Senate Republicans' court now and, even if Democratic votes kill the bill, Republicans will get the blame if welfare reform is not passed.

The House passed a pretty good welfare reform bill, but the Senate has called a temporary truce between two competing bills and gone home for the August recess. The vote will come soon after Labor Day.

On the business-as-usual side are Majority Leader Bob Dole, his chief-of-staff Sheila Burke, the embattled Bob Packwood, and probably Daniel Patrick Moynihan (who thinks he is the Oracle on this subject). Leading the end-welfare-as-we-know-it side are Senators Phil Gramm, Lauch Faircloth, and John Ashcroft.

While it would not be much of an exaggeration to describe this division as a preplay of presidential politics, Americans have a lot at stake in which bill passes. Here are some fundamental ways in which the Gramm bill differs from the Dole bill.

The Gramm bill would prohibit the use of federal funds to give increased cash payments to women who have additional children while already enrolled in AFDC. States could use their own funds to pay increased benefits if they wish.

The Gramm bill would prohibit federal funds from being used to give cash payments to minor girls under age 18 who have children out-of- wedlock. States would be free to use their own funds for this purpose if they wish.

The Gramm bill would generally require mothers to establish paternity in order to obtain future AFDC benefits, starting in January 1996. States would be free to exempt 25 percent of these mothers from this requirement, and mothers of newborn children who are cooperating could receive cash aid for the first six months while the paternity process is proceeding.

The Gramm bill would increase a state's AFDC block grant if the state reduces the number of its out-of-wedlock births without an increase in its abortion rate. The Gramm bill would provide some funds for abstinence education.

The Gramm bill would require states to develop a plan to reduce illegitimacy and to set numeric goals for the illegitimacy ratio in each state for the next ten years. The intent of these state plans and goals is to focus public attention on the scandalous growth in illegitimacy, so there would be no penalty if the goals were not met.

Ever since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society greatly expanded welfare and made it respectable to be on the government dole, welfare has had a pervasive anti-marriage bias. The business-as-usual Dole welfare bill does nothing to change this bias.

The House-passed welfare bill (H.R. 4) tries to remedy this, and this was copied by the Gramm bill. Both bills create a performance criterion that measures a state's success in "caseload reduction" whether that reduction occurs because of a decrease in out-of- wedlock births, an increase in marriages, or an increase in employment of single mothers.

The Dole bill, on the other hand, accords the state "caseload reduction" credit only if the single mother gets a job. This does nothing to change the anti-marriage bias of the welfare system.

The Dole bill has language that appears to address several of these problems, but the bottom line is that the Dole bill is closer to the Clinton position than to the Gramm bill. The Clinton and Dole positions on marriage and illegitimacy are virtually identical.

For example, the Dole bill only requires mothers to "cooperate" in establishing paternity. That's the same rule that has failed to get results in the past.

The Dole bill would continue cash payments to unmarried teen mothers if they reside with their parents or adult relatives. But three-fourths of teen mothers on AFDC already do this and, in many cases, the adult parent is the source of the problem of multi- generational dependency.

The American people elected a new Republican Congress, not merely to cut federal spending, but to terminate the federal programs that are doing harm. The liberal welfare program has probably done the most harm to our social fabric of any federal spending program.

The liberal welfare system has rewarded idleness and illegitimacy and penalized work and marriage. It has created millions of fatherless children who today are a social problem of immense proportions.

There is probably no way to undo 30 years of damage, and no way to abolish the system overnight. But the House bill and the Gramm- Faircloth-Ashcroft bill are the best chance we have.