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THE GAME PLAN TO SELL "COMPARABLE WORTH"

One of the few new ideas in 1984 politics is called "Comparable Worth." It's been endorsed by all the Democratic presidential candidates, and Comparable Worth bills are controversial issues in Congress and in many state legislatures.

The people pushing the Comparable Worth concept have a three-step program by which they think they can fasten this radical notion on our economy. It involves (1) getting us to accept two false assumptions, (2) getting us to commit to their plan of action, and (3) hiring their personnel to carry it out.

The first assumption is that women should be dealt with as a group and not as individuals. "Equal pay for substantially equal work," which is the law of the land today, is a system of finding out if discrimination exists by comparing the actual work done by individuals (regardless of who they are).

"Comparable worth," however, is a concept of comparing the worth (not work) of groups of men with groups of women. It looks at group worth rather than at the individual's work.

This group concept doesn't tell you anything at all about justice to the individual. To use an analogy, if I tell you that women, on the average, are only 90% as tall as men, you still haven't got the slightest idea how tall I am.

Comparable Worth's second assumption is that people are (or should be) paid what they are "worth." Of course, you are not paid what you are worth! Each of us is paid a compromise between what we think we're worth and what someone is willing to pay you. Those millions of decisions add up to what we call the free American economy.

Practically everybody thinks he is worth more than he is being paid. I've been taking my own informal survey on this question, and I can't find anyone who will admit he is paid as much as he is worth except people in the television business.

Why are football and tennis players paid more than the President of the United States? Why are lawyers paid more than ministers? Why are rock stars paid more than musicians in major symphony orchestras? Why does Henry Kissinger get a $20,000 fee for

lectures when others receive so much less?

The plan of action of the Comparable Worth advocates involves persuading each legislature to pass a bill calling for a "study." That's a clever scheme to pull the wool over the eyes of those who haven't heard about the 1983 Federal District Court decision in AFSCME v. State of Washington which (unless reversed on appeal) is estimated to cost the taxpayers of Washington State $1 billion.

Ordering a "study" sounds innocuous because that is the way legislators have traditionally shelved sticky proposals. Just order a "study," and you don't hear any more about the subject for a couple of years.

When it comes to Comparable Worth, however, a "study" is a dangerous and expensive trap. The lesson of the Washington State case is, if you order a study, you are buying a lawsuit and putting your head in the noose. The Federal judge as much as said to Washington State: You knew you were guilty of sex discrimination when you ordered the study, so now you must pay damages based on the job evaluation it produced (even though you never agreed to accept its results).

In legislating a study, the Comparable Worth advocates try to stipulate two requirements. One is that marketplace factors must be divorced from evaluations of job "worth." Of course, that makes the study wholly subject to the biases of the job evaluators.

Secondly, a Comparable Worth study always categorizes as "male" or "female" those groups of jobs which have 70% or more of one sex. The study thus pretends that the other 30% (who are of the opposite sex) simply don't exist.

But, if jobs are truly comparable, why shouldn't those who perform them have the same pay regardless of whether they are men or women? Why should only the 70% who are women in a specific type of job be recognized, while the 30% who are men be ignored (and vice versa)? The Comparable Worth concept is clearly sex discriminatory.

The third step of this radical game plan is to jimmy the legislation so that Comparable Worth advocates will hire the personnel to make the study. Wouldn't you be willing to work for the wage that a "study" says your job is "worth" if you or your friends could make the study and decide what the job is worth?

Americans would be very foolish to substitute wage-setting by commissars masquerading as bureaucrats, judges, or job evaluators for the high wages achieved by our free economy.