FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 / (618) 462-5415

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SHOULD FATHERS SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN?

The most emotional and appealing of the unremitting attacks on President Reagan's economic program is the bleeding-heart coverage of how budget cuts will close child-care centers, cut welfare payments, and generally leave little children without care, food or shelter. How could the Reagan Administration be so cruel and heartless?

It's time for society to face up to the moral, social, and financial questions involved. Shouldn't low-income fathers have the same obligation to support their children which middle- and upper-income fathers have traditionally shouldered?

When Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) was established in the Social Security Act of 1935, it was assumed that most recipients would be wives and children of deceased or disabled fathers. A big change started in the 1950s; by the 1980s only 4% of the fathers of AFDC recipients were deceased or disabled.

In the 1950s the social service professionals who administered the program began to turn on the faucet of AFDC payments without making any attempt whatsoever to collect support payments from the father. They treated him as simply irrelevant. A new generation of fathers came into being whose attitude was, as expressed in one typical case in New York City Family Court, "She doesn't need help from me. She's on welfare."

The social service professionals concocted a smokescreen to conceal their new policy and its impact. The more candid ones said that the notion that fathers should ordinarily be regarded as the primary source of support for their children is an outdated "stereotype" and should be replaced by the concept that government must guarantee an adequate income for people in whatever lifestyle they choose to follow.

The professionals who wanted to mask their ideology would assert: "The fathers can't be found; if found, they will not admit paternity; if they do, they do not earn enough to provide support; etc." A mountain of factual evidence is available to disprove all those claims, as shown in Blanche Bernstein's recent article in the magazine "The Public Interest" for Winter 1982.

It's pretty clear that the social service professionals simply looked upon AFDC as a conduit to redistribute income from taxpaying Americans to nontaxpaying Americans. The indiscriminate handouts of welfare funds became a prime tool in the hands of the liberals who want to restructure society.

When Congress saw what was happening, it tried to put its finger in the dyke by passing Title IV-D of the Social Security Act. This was designed to promote an aggressive effort to locate absent fathers and require them to make support payments for their children.

After several years of experience with this law, enough evidence is available to indicate that it will work where states try to make it work, and it won't work if they don't. The "Child Support Enforcement Statistics" for 1980, published by the Department of Health and Human Services, show the percentage of Title IV-D cases with successful child-support collections ranged from 43% in Massachusetts, 32% in Connecticut and 22% in Michigan all the way down to 8% in New York and Illinois.

It is interesting to note that, when the child-support collections are compared in dollars (rather than in number of cases, as in the preceding paragraph), Michigan has the best record of all and New York and Illinois the worst. Yet, Michigan has probably the worst economic problems in the country today, plus one of the higher welfare benefit payment standards.

The difference is the willingness of the Michigan courts to enforce the law plus the cooperation of the unions. The auto companies and the UAW cooperate in enforcement, including use of payroll deduction orders.

The main problem we face is that the liberals have created a climate of opinion among judges, bureaucrats, and social service professionals which is antagonistic to the concept that a father should have the primary obligation to support his own children. The social and financial costs of allowing this situation to continue are horrendous.

Nothing could do more to stabilize the family than an aggressive program to enforce the traditional obligation and function of fathers. And, incidentally, it would be the best way to cut the increasing costs of the welfare burden.