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Take Charge of Your Future

**Dismantle the
Poverty Pentagon**

by Robert Woodson

The winner of the 1988 presidential race faces the biggest challenge ever in dealing with America's 30 million poor.

U.S. social policy, as we now know it, is at a dead end. To get things on track again, the "poverty Pentagon" — the vast bureaucracy which manages the no-win "War On Poverty" at great cost to taxpayers and the poor alike — must be dismantled and restructured into a welfare system which encourages and supports self-reliance. This is the only way our poor will very have a chance to get out of the poverty trap.

The true test of character of any nation is the extent to which it is able to provide for the least fortunate of its members. This moral obligation now converges with a great economic necessity. In the next 20 years, the U.S. economy is expected to produce 16.8 million new jobs. Population trends indicate that this workforce will increasingly be Black and Hispanic — the groups which now make up most of our poor.

One million Black and Hispanic youngsters drop out of school each year and a million more graduate illiterate. If America is to be competitive as a nation, we must make sure its future workforce will be able to compete. We must press for dramatic changes in improving the lives of our poor.

America has been very generous to the poor over the years. Unfortunately, the social policies of the past twenty years have created a mammoth "poverty Pentagon" that has consumed hundreds of billions of tax dollars without reducing poverty.

Before the advent of government programs, there was nobody to "take care" of Blacks, so they cared for themselves; they found ways to solve their own problems.

In 1863, when a thousand Blacks were fired off the docks in Baltimore, they didn't respond by marching on Washington, they formed the Chesapeake Main Dry Dock and Railroad Company which operated for 18 years. When Blacks were refused access to banks, they formed 53 banks and savings and loan associations with some of them with assets of millions. And this was in 1883.

If these great achievements were possible then, when conditions were worse than today, Blacks could certainly do even better now.

One of the greatest obstacles to such self-reliant behavior is the poverty industry that has developed to "provide for" the poor. Those service providers — regardless of their good intentions — have every incentive to see that no permanent solutions are ever found to poverty in America.

Today's poor are unwitting participants in a poor morality play where the worst parts are reserved for them. And we keep rewarding them for taking these parts.

If you are poor and you are a drug addict, there's a program for you. If you are poor and you are pregnant, there's a program for you. If you are poor and delinquent, there's a program for you. And on it goes. If you happen to be poor, not on drugs, not committing a crime, not sexually active, you obey your parents, and you're going to school, there's no program for you. The message we're sending to poor people is that if you want to receive some support, you must have a problem, and you must act in an anti-social or self-destructive way. As a consequence, the poor are discouraged from helping themselves.

The time is at hand to start

focusing on the many success stories that can be found all across poor America.

Let's not go into a public housing complex and interview a woman with five children, two on drugs, two in prison and one a prostitute. Let's go next door to a woman, like Kimi Gray, in Washington, D.C.'s Kenilworth-Parkside housing project, who was abandoned at 19 with five children. Kimi Gray got off welfare in five years and sent all five of her children to college. She proved that with a little self-determination and hard work poverty can be overcome.

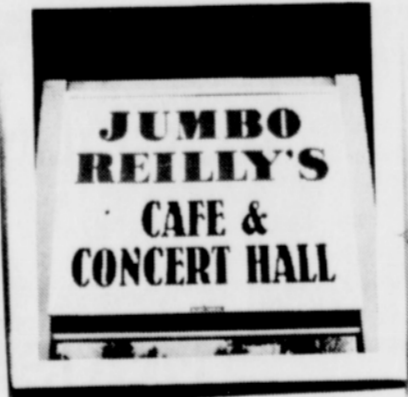
Look at 13 public housing projects in other U.S. cities, where residents are engaged in a self-help renaissance, defying the so-called experts with their definitions of those communities as cesspools of society. The people in these projects disprove the notion that low-income people are deficient of values, that they're incapable of establishing standards for themselves.

What the poor need is not more government programs and funding, most of which doesn't get to them anyway. In New York City, for example, 69 cents of every dollar earmarked for social welfare does not go to the poor; it goes to those who supposedly serve the poor — the bureaucrats of the poverty Pentagon.

The poor need innovators and innovation. They need to learn how to create wealth, not undermine it.

America needs to encourage and reward self-reliance in its inner-city schools and communities. Tomorrow's competitiveness depends on how well-equipped today's poor become and how they're taught to succeed — on their own.

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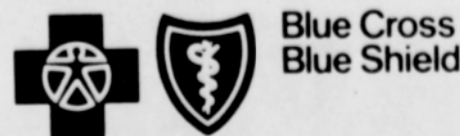
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