

The Free Congress Commentary

The Late Robert B. Carleson - A Free Congress Senior Fellow Of Lasting Achievement

By Paul M. Weyrich - May 10, 2006

An unheralded poverty warrior has passed away. Robert B. Carleson did more to shape welfare policy in this country over the past three decades but news of his death did not draw long, detailed obituaries in most major newspapers. Welfare "rights" organizations will not pay homage to this man whose work helped start many onetime welfare recipients on the path to self-sufficiency. It is not Politically Correct to identify conservatives who advocate work to be compassionate but millions of Americans owe Carleson a debt of gratitude for spearheading consistently the concept of workfare.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated: "Welfare is a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit." Time proved him correct, particularly as welfare programs had more liberal requirements. Generations of families had lost their sense of the work ethic, expecting a government check rather than payment from an employer. The perverse incentives of the welfare system were noted by Don Taylor, then Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services, in a November/December 1996 POLICY REVIEW article, "Welfare Reform: Can the States Fly Solo?"

"The 'war on children' began when the federal government rewarded nonwork and nonmarriage. While perhaps well meaning, those who advocate raising family income artificially through welfare have made the state a competitor with the father and mother as the key providers for the family. In Mississippi, the value of welfare benefits to unwed mothers now exceeds the income of 17 to 30 percent of all single men."

It is a useful time to review the career of Bob Carleson. Recently the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Family Assistance released statistics for FY 2004, assessing the progress made by States as to working welfare recipients. The results should be disheartening for voters in a number of States. The target work rate for "all families" on welfare, established in the reauthorization of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, is 50%. In Pennsylvania, only 7.1% of recipients from "all families" were working in FY 2004. West Virginia (11.7%) did little better. Arizona (25.5%), Arkansas (27.3%), California (23.1%), Connecticut (24.3%), Delaware (22.1%), the District of Columbia (18.2%), Georgia (24.8%), Maryland (16.0%), Michigan (24.5%), Minnesota (26.8%), Mississippi (21.0%), Missouri (19.5%), North Dakota (25.3%), Rhode Island (23.7%), Utah (26.2%) and Vermont (24.9%) are laggards.

Carleson would not be pleased. He had said long ago: "Anyone who is capable of working should expect to earn [his] own welfare benefit." Ronald Reagan, then Governor of California, selected Carleson, the Chief Deputy Director of the California Department of Public Works, to rein in California's soaring welfare costs. Carleson, leading a task force, devised a plan and negotiated with the leaders of the Democratic California Legislature. The plan actually increased benefits to those recipients, usually disabled, who truly needed help. Incentives to work and a crackdown on fraud were included in the plan. LOS ANGELES TIMES reporter Jack Smith wrote an article, "Workfare: Has It Helped People Get Off The Dole?" published on Christmas Day, 1972, in which one divorced mother of three said of her new "workfare" job; "This is quite an opportunity." Smith wrote that California's Community Work Experience Program represented an important component of the State's 1971 Welfare Reform Act, requiring 80 hours of public service work a month from able-bodied adults receiving AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependant Children) payments. Carleson is quoted: "There are all sorts of worthwhile things a welfare mother can do to help her community and increase her own sense of self-worth."

Many Californians were critical of the plan, even going so far as to call it "slavery." The net effect was undoubtedly positive inasmuch as Carleson stated in November 1972 that the reduction in the welfare caseload allowed California to avoid increased taxation. By then the State of California had prevailed in 14 of 15 court challenges to the Welfare Reform Act, a sign of how vigorous the resistance was to real reform. "No one knows how much fat, fraud and abuse there is in the welfare system, but every time the state tightens its procedures, the welfare load goes down," Carleson explained. California's case load was predicted to continue rising but Carleson said the rolls experienced a reduction in 236,000 cases. Carleson later told Reagan advisor Martin Anderson that, contrary to accusations, people were not "cut" from the welfare rolls but by applying the law more stringently undeserving welfare applicants came to understand that welfare benefits would not be freely available.

Carleson served Presidents Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford as Commissioner of Welfare, advised Reagan in his 1976 and 1980 Presidential campaigns, directed the transition at HHS after the victory over President Jimmy Carter and became a Special Assistant to the President for Policy Development in the Reagan Administration. He succeeded in helping to assure that the 1981 Budget Reconciliation Act incorporated workfare requirements.

Carleson's most important contribution to welfare reform came in 1995-1996, when Congress was considering welfare reform. As Senior Fellow at the Free Congress Foundation, Carleson was an adamant advocate of granting the States flexibility to design and manage their own programs. This placed him at odds with other leading conservative advocates for welfare reform, who wanted strings attached.

Carleson countered in an analysis, WELFARE REFORM: SHOULD THERE BE STRINGS ATTACHED?, published by the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA):

"Block grants without strings would allow each state to redesign its current welfare program completely. Current failed programs need to be thoroughly reformed and replaced. Thirty years of experience has proved that Washington has no workable welfare solution."

Thanks in large part to Carleson's persistent prodding, the 1996 welfare reform plan enacted by the Republican-led Congress and signed into law by President William J. Clinton instituted a block grant program, replacing federal matching grants for welfare recipients, a perverse incentive for states to keep

their welfare rolls high. Block grants allowed states to keep money even if it lowered welfare rolls. Carleson also pressed for a strong work requirement. Doug Bandow, writing in tribute to the deceased Carleson on Citizen Outreach's webpage, called the 1996 act Carleson's "greatest moment."

The 1996 Act was renewed earlier this year. The workfare requirement needed to be strengthened because too many States had ceased pushing welfare recipients to work as the rolls declined. Fifty percent of TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) recipients are supposed to be holding jobs by October 1st of this year or face slashing of Federal funds. Pennsylvania, for one, must rush to catch up. The blasé attitude by Pennsylvania officials toward the work requirement is reflected in a comment about the 50% work requirement by Kathy Yorkievtz, Deputy Secretary for Income Maintenance at the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. "It's a pretty stringent way of measuring. We've been doing a lot of analysis and work to figure out how to get there," Yorkievtz told the WILKES BARRE TIMES LEADER. ("Racing Toward Welfare Deadline" by Jennifer Learn-Andes; May 4, 2006 posting.) Yorkievtz added a perfunctory comment that Pennsylvania was making "strong and steady progress." Yet neighboring New York (37.8%), Ohio (65.2%) and New Jersey (34.6%) evidently retained an emphasis on work, according to the FY 2004 statistics on TANF work participation rates for "all families."

That brings us to today. Does the failure of Governors such as Edward Rendell, of Pennsylvania, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, of California, and the State Legislatures to instill tough workfare requirements indicate Carleson failed? Absolutely not. Carleson wrote in the NCPA study:

"Block grants with minimal restrictions would allow states to allocate available funds to the most urgent and productive uses. Moreover, governors and state legislatures would no longer be able to hide behind federal mandates. If they did not adopt the most effective and least costly reforms discovered by other states, they would be voted out of office."

HHS Office of Family Assistance statistics demonstrate which States have moved decisively to enforce strict workfare requirements and which have failed. This is an election year. Voters in States with fewer welfare recipients working should be asking tough questions. While Governors and numerous State Legislatures have succeeded in putting welfare recipients to work, other leaders evidently appeared not to care about their responsibility to the taxpayers and to help welfare recipients start climbing the economic ladder.

There could be no greater tribute to the legacy of Robert B. Carleson than further achievement in gaining paying jobs for welfare recipients. Free Congress Foundation was honored that Bob Carleson for many years was an FCF Senior Fellow.

Paul M. Weyrich is Chairman and CEO of the Free Congress Foundation.