

## The Washington Times Robert Carleson, the Quiet Giant

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No one who studies the rise of modern conservatism in the latter half of the 20th century could deny the importance of Robert B. Carleson. His tireless campaign to reform welfare stands not only as one of conservatism's first tests, but also one of its first and everlasting successes. Yet his death Friday at the age of 75 has received scant public attention. This is unfortunate. As many have remarked, without a Bob Carleson there might not have been a President Ronald Reagan.

In 1970, when Mr. Reagan was entering his second term as governor of California, he turned his attention to welfare reform. The previous decade had seen a depressing and budget-busting addition of 1.6 million people to the relief rolls. The system was costing the state \$2.5 billion a year, which at the time was the highest welfare spending in the country. Facing a Democratic legislature, Mr. Reagan's promises of reform did not look good. The larger question was whether anything could be done.

To answer that question, Mr. Reagan looked to Mr. Carleson, whom he appointed director of the welfare department. After a year of studying the crisis, Mr. Carleson handed the governor a plan that would restrict eligibility, clamp down on corruption and increase work incentives. Predictably, his proposals were widely opposed by Democrats, not to mention the Nixon White House, which was working on a nationalized welfare bill based on the same failed liberal policies. Undeterred, Mr. Reagan pushed ahead with the Carleson plan and on Aug. 13, 1971, the Welfare Reform Act became law.

The results were irrefutable. A year after enactment, total welfare spending dropped for the first time, despite an increase in spending on the neediest families. Where once the welfare rolls had been increasing by nearly 40,000 people per month, by the end of the decade there were 300,000 fewer people than in 1971.

Mr. Reagan's success forced the White House to backtrack on its nationalized plan, and the governor was invited to Washington to explain how he did it. His political star rose precipitously, thanks in no small part to Mr. Carleson. Campaigning for the presidency, Mr. Reagan would trumpet welfare reform as his single greatest domestic policy achievement.

In 1973, Mr. Carleson was appointed U.S. Commissioner of Welfare, where he oversaw the first decline in the national welfare rolls since World War II. After a stint in the Reagan White House, Mr. Carleson returned to the private sector, occasionally acting as a consultant for the Justice Department. He was brought back to Washington after the Republican Revolution of 1994 to assist the leadership in enacting federal welfare reform. His plan -- to replace the open-ended entitlement program Aid to Families with Dependent Children with finite block grants to states -- was twice vetoed by President Clinton. It was finally signed into law in 1996 and to this day remains an unrivaled accomplishment of the conservative movement.

In his final years as a senior fellow at the Free Congress Foundation and CEO of the American Civil Rights Union, Mr. Carleson championed such conservative causes as property rights and gun ownership. He was particularly attached to the cause of defending the Boy Scouts against the American Civil Liberties Union. The lack of appreciation in the media likely reflects Mr. Carleson's unassuming nature, as he was a man who never sought the spotlight. But even the humble may cast large shadows, and few larger than Robert Carleson's.