

*“One of the most striking aspects of the old English philosophy surrounding poor relief is how many of its principle tenets were echoed by Gingrich and his colleagues during the welfare reform of the 1990s.”*

## A CONFLUENCE OF CONSERVATIVE PRINCIPLES

### *Newt Gingrich, the Republican Party, and 1990s Welfare Reform*

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WELFARE REFORM IN THE UNITED STATES, ALWAYS A CONTENTIOUS SUBJECT, BECAME A PROMINENT NATIONAL ISSUE IN THE 1990s, LEADING UP TO THE 1996 PASSAGE OF THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WORK OPPORTUNITY RECONCILIATION ACT (PRWORA). THE REFORM WAS PUSHED THROUGH CONGRESS BY A RESURGENT REPUBLICAN PARTY LED BY THE FIERY SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE, NEWT GINGRICH. TODAY, PRWORA IS STILL HAILED BY MANY CONSERVATIVES AS A MAJOR STEP FORWARD IN CHANGING THE WAY SOCIAL WELFARE WORKS IN AMERICA. IT IS NOT IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS, HOWEVER, JUST HOW CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN WELFARE REFORM REALLY WAS. IN FACT, THE REFORM EFFORT AND THE IDEOLOGIES AND JUSTIFICATIONS BEHIND IT HAD THEIR ROOTS IN THE ELIZABETHAN POOR LAW OF 17TH CENTURY ENGLAND. THE CONCEPTS OF PATERNALISM AND SOCIAL DARWINISM THAT WERE SO PREVALENT IN THE OLD ENGLISH LAWS WERE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF 1990s WELFARE REFORM IN THE UNITED STATES AS WELL.

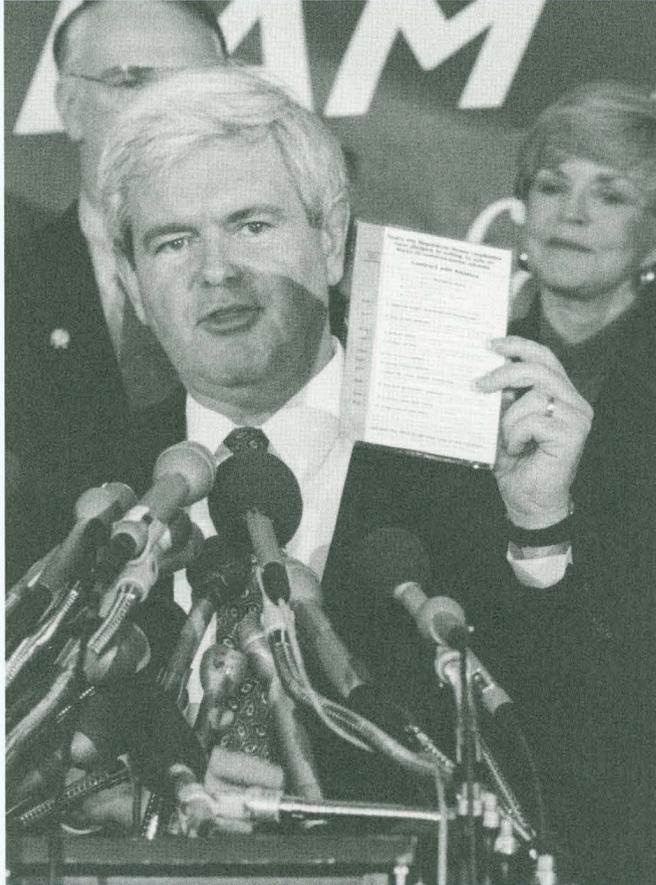
Few aspects of domestic politics in the United States are as controversial and fundamental as the debate over the welfare system. Never was this fact made more clear than during the Clinton administration of the 1990s. The collision of President Clinton's promise to overhaul the welfare system and the rising conservative views in the legislature resulted in a congressional debate that was "as charged as any in recent memory."<sup>i</sup> Republican perspectives on welfare were dominant throughout this crucial period of reform that ultimately led to the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996. Conservative ideology was best personified by Newt Gingrich, the Speaker of the House during this Republican-dominated time. It is important to first look at the history of the critical mid-1990s era in order to gain a perspective on who the major players were, what they stood for, and what led

up to the climactic passage of the PRWORA. A further examination of the Republican Party's principles surrounding welfare reform and how their views influenced the reform is necessary. An analysis of the Elizabethan Poor Law and the ideas that formed its core will show that these concepts are the basis for many of the Republican beliefs that have had significant effect on the

welfare system in modern America.

One of the promises on which Bill Clinton campaigned in 1992 was "to end welfare as we know it."<sup>ii</sup> Many Americans were disillusioned with the existing welfare system. As

Brendon O'Connor explains, this promise by Clinton "spoke to that majority of Americans wanting to be rid of the old welfare system" which had been popularized by the Democrats in the 1960s and 1970s under the Great Society programs.<sup>iii</sup> Rather than completely oppose the rising wave of conservative thought, "[Clinton's] position conceded that conservatives had been correct to criticize the results of the welfare system."<sup>iv</sup> Departing from the traditional stance of his party, Clinton sought to reform welfare in major ways that he believed would benefit America as a whole. His willingness to change how welfare



NEWT GINGRICH HOLDS A COPY OF THE REPUBLICANS  
CONTRACT WITH AMERICA

worked was a step forward that enabled his allies and opponents to put welfare reform at the top of the political agenda. With all sides determined to impose their ideas on the new American welfare system, the stage was set for a monumental change.

However, things took a turn against Clinton and the

Democrats when the Republicans gained majorities in the House and Senate following the 1994 elections. As O'Connor explains, "Clinton's liberal legacy on welfare reform was very limited. His ability to pass his own welfare proposal effectively ended with the 1994 Republican congressional victory."<sup>vi</sup> Newt Gingrich, a man who embodied much of Republican ideology surrounding welfare reform, was the man who did much to propel the Republicans to victory in this election. The *Contract with America*, which O'Connor describes as the Republican's "1994 election manifesto," was "fiercely anti-liberal and open about its conservative goals."<sup>vi</sup> As has become the case for many victorious politicians in the U.S., Gingrich "claimed the election was a mandate to enact the Republican agenda."<sup>vi</sup> The Republicans quickly moved forward to dismantle the welfare system and remake it in their own image.

"After 1994, Clinton quite simply was no longer leading the welfare debate," O'Connor writes, and "from 1995 onward he could only offer occasional criticisms or exercise his veto as Gingrich and the GOP passed strongly conservative legislation through the House and the Senate."<sup>viii</sup> With Republicans pushing hard, it was only a matter of time before the welfare system as a whole was transformed. Finally, "in September of 1996 Clinton signed the Republican's welfare bill that effectively ended the liberal welfare state."<sup>ix</sup> The Republicans succeeded in getting Clinton to sign a bill that fought through liberal opposition while retaining its conservative grounding and was made into law that "retained its original substance and spirit."<sup>x</sup>

The PRWORA brought about a sweeping change in how American welfare worked, changing the nature of many federal programs and imposing new rules and restrictions on families receiving support.<sup>xi</sup> The greatest change to federal programs was the move from the existing system known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to a system called Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). The crux of this change was the end of welfare as an entitlement under AFDC and the introduction of three major policies: work requirements, a time

limit for welfare recipients, and increased control by individual states.<sup>xii</sup> As a matter of policy, the PRWORA was designed to "increase the flexibility of the states" and allow individual states to have more control over how they deal with their welfare-receiving constituents.<sup>xiii</sup> The time limits meant that no family could be on welfare for more than two continuous years at a time and no family could receive benefits from the government for more than an ultimate total of five years. Severely curtailing how long families could stay on welfare was a major change, as was the new set of work requirements. In an effort to "end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage," the PRWORA called for welfare recipients to be forced to work after being on welfare for the allotted time.<sup>xiv</sup>

Republican ideals are clearly present in all of these parts of the PRWORA, and the development and triumph of this way of thinking about welfare is one of the chief legacies of Gingrich and his Republican colleagues. In the end, Clinton's call to "end welfare as we know it" combined with his inability to push his own welfare reform through, allowed for the success of conservative reform movements. As O'Connor explains, "the Clinton administration failed this challenge on welfare reform and instead it created a political environment that played into the hands of conservative legislators."<sup>xv</sup>

Republican ideology was a powerful force behind the welfare reform of the 1990s, and that ideology was embodied in the person of Newt Gingrich. Described by contemporary newspaper articles as a "firebrand," Gingrich gave the Republicans their first majority in the House in forty years.<sup>xvi</sup> As a member of the House, Gingrich spread his consistently conservative message; with his rise to Speaker, the *Washington Post* wrote in 1994, "his party [became] hostage to his vision and his personality."<sup>xvii</sup> Despite a history as a campaigner for minority rights, Gingrich was a man whose "support for civil rights was incorporated within a conservative conception of social justice."<sup>xviii</sup> In an outlook that his Republican allies would all echo,

Gingrich felt that the existing “liberal welfare state” was harming both poor people and Americans as a whole by “increasing poverty and dependency.”<sup>xix</sup> Gingrich’s reasoning stated that welfare rewarded the poor for not working, destroying their character and making them dependent on the government; in this way, Gingrich saw his calls for a change to welfare as being in the best interests of the poor themselves. As he writes in his book, *To Renew America*, “for every day that we allow the current conditions to continue, we are condemning the poor—and particularly poor children—to being deprived of their basic rights as Americans. The welfare state reduces the poor from citizens to clients.”<sup>xx</sup> Many of Gingrich’s conservative policies were rooted in social Darwinism, paternalism, and a concept of punitive action, all in the name of ultimately improving the poor segment of American society.

Many have noted Gingrich’s policies bear social Darwinist undertones,<sup>xxi</sup> particularly in the concept of an “undeserving poor,” a group Gingrich described as “[those] who refuse to work, who refuse to do anything, who refuse to try, somebody who doesn’t have a legitimate claim on us.”<sup>xxii</sup> This philosophy fits into the Republican conception of the goal of welfare. As Robin H. Rogers-Dillon summarizes in *The Welfare Experiments*, “[social Darwinism] emphasized the ‘survival of the fittest’ in society, and the inherent unfitness of those at the bottom of it.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Republicans viewed welfare as a way for society to force certain people to provide for themselves, with the belief that without being induced to work these “undeserving poor” would never motivate themselves to improve their situation. This was one reason behind the work requirements and the time limits of the PRWORA—the role of welfare was seen by conservatives as making the less worthy members of society work and provide for their own well-being rather than relying on the government to simply give them relief. Only by limiting the time a family could be on welfare and by requiring work instead of welfare could the poor be stimulated to help themselves.

Paternalism is implied in a vast amount of Republican thought on welfare reform as well. Closely connected to social Darwinism, paternalistic thought sees those on welfare as people who need to be helped by the government because they cannot help themselves. This is one reason for work requirements and time limits; another becomes apparent when reading Rogers-Dillon’s explanation of the basis behind paternalistic thought. “Paternalists advocate a supervisory approach to poverty,” she writes, “requiring that welfare recipients fulfill particular social obligations in return for support.”<sup>xxiv</sup> This is the brand of thinking that led to the adoption of work requirements in the PRWORA that were strongly supported by Gingrich and his fellow conservatives. The policies which sought to “encourage work” were consistent with Republican goals in regards to welfare reform and carried with them a strong sense of paternalistic oversight of those receiving welfare.

Welfare itself is often seen as paternalistic. In their seminal work, *Regulating the Poor*, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward explain this phenomenon: “the occasion of giving vitally needed assistance can easily become the occasion of inculcating the work ethic, for example, and of enforcing work itself, for those who resist risk the withdrawal of that assistance.”<sup>xxv</sup> Though writing about the general philosophy of welfare programs, Piven and Cloward predict the sort of paternalism that is so prevalent in the debate over how to operate welfare systems. Republicans stood for the “strong promotion of the need to reinvigorate the work ethic and to get welfare recipients involved in workfare programs.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

Another aspect of paternalism was seen in the way Republicans fought the battle to write and pass the PRWORA. When debating the need for welfare reform, Republicans asserted that the main cause of welfare reform was not to reduce dependency, poverty, or a lack of work ethic. These problems were all subservient to the true enemy: illegitimate births.<sup>xxvii</sup> The rhetoric regarding illegitimacy is most clear in the book form of the *Contract with America*, which refers to the “out-of-wedlock births that are

ripping apart our nation's social fabric," with the implication that Republicans will work to save the nation by correcting those who cause this problem.<sup>xxviii</sup> Title I of the PRWORA claims that "the negative consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family, and society are well documented."<sup>xxix</sup> The act also details its purpose, which is, among other things, to "prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies" and to "encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."<sup>xxx</sup> Those in favor of the PRWORA saw it as an opportunity to make the poor of America act in a way beneficial to themselves, their children, and their society. Turning illegitimate births into a source of controversy showed how the Republicans were willing to take a paternalistic attitude towards the poor as part of their reform agenda.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Finally, paternalistic ways of thinking are quite evident in the way Gingrich saw himself and his purpose in history. Like many Republicans, Gingrich saw his mission as one of saving America from the path it had been following for the past generation. In *To Renew America*, Gingrich writes that

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“the central challenge to our generation is to reassert and renew American civilization.”<sup>xxxii</sup> He goes on to describe the “decay of our civilization,” and much of his book deals with how to fix America for the benefit of all its citizens.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Of course, everyone has a reasonable expectation that politicians should try and combat the problems facing their society, but Gingrich took it a step further. The same *Washington Post* article that talks about Gingrich's control of the Republican party in 1994 details “his habit of archiving virtually everything he has written and said;” the article goes on to question whether Gingrich “[saw] himself as a potential historical figure.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Gingrich responds to this inquiry by say that he “turned out to be right,” suggesting that he did, in fact, see himself as something of a savior of the proper American way of life.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The concept of illegitimate births illuminates another aspect of the PRWORA and Republican thought regarding welfare. Focusing on illegitimacy was a major political tactic Republicans used to gain support for their welfare bill, but conservative thought carried an air of corrective thinking that went beyond simple paternalism. Elizabeth Drew writes that “Gingrich and his allies were bent on shifting the welfare debate from one concerning work to one concerning illegitimacy, which could be treated punitively.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> O'Connor notes “their objective was to reignite the stigma of children outside wedlock . . . In short, the PRWORA wished to deter potential TANF recipients and make somewhat of an example out of those receiving TANF to deter others.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Another major result of the PWORA is its decision to grant greater power to the states in managing their own welfare systems under TANF guidelines. The Republican party often identifies with the cause of states' rights, and this aspect of the PRWORA shows the practical effects of that stance. But some claim that the further delegation of power to the states has the effect of weakening the voice of citizens who wish to influence welfare policy. In *Regulating the Poor*, Piven and Cloward note that the Constitution, which gives varying powers to both federal

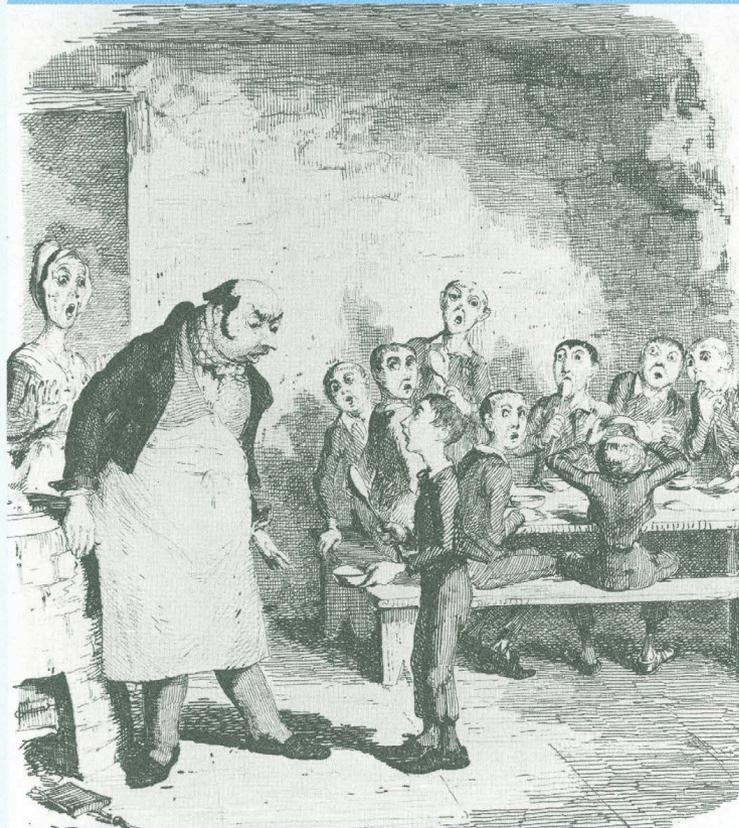
and state governments, manages to “decentralize power structurally.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The net effect of this system, they argue, was that “decentralization meshed with the fragmentation of national authority to make parties ineffective as instruments of popular influence.”<sup>xl</sup> Although this constitutional scheme was not specifically meant to deal with welfare policies, Piven and Cloward mention that “the theorists of the ‘democratic class struggle’ place great weight on the role of labor or socialist parties in the politics of the welfare state;” this leads to their conclusion that the weakness of American political parties results in a populace that has a hard time organizing and effecting change on the issues of labor and welfare.<sup>xli</sup> This way of going about welfare stands in direct contrast to the liberal Great Society system that Republicans did away with; Piven and Cloward write that “the hallmark of the Great Society programs was the direct relationship between the national government and the ghettos, a relationship in which both state and local governments were undercut.”<sup>xlii</sup>

It is often noted that conservative views dominated this period of reform, but little has been made of the ideological

roots of this conservatism. Many of the recommendations that arose at this time have their roots in the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 and other Elizabethan-era acts that preceded it. The “Old Poor Law,” as it is sometimes called, formalized many existing practices into one set of laws for how to deal with the poor.<sup>xliii</sup> The English system included

forms of work requirements, punitive action, and local control, as well as a strong sense of paternalism, a concept of the “undeserving poor,” and a concern for the effect poor people were having on society—all things that sound very familiar to the ideals of the Republican party during the 1990s. Perhaps without realizing, conservatives such as Gingrich were actually looking back to the 16th and 17th centuries when they were calling for a change in America’s welfare system.

CHARLES DICKENS’ *OLIVER TWIST* GAVE AN ACCOUNT OF A POOR CHILD’S LIFE IN THE ENGLISH WORKHOUSES



Work requirements and local control of welfare, two of the most important practices put in place by the PRWORA, have direct ties to the old English system of “poor relief.” The English were often in favor of the idea of “setting the able-bodied to work and apprenticing poor children” as Paul Slack writes in *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782*.<sup>xliv</sup> Money accrued from the “poor rates” charged to the

wealthy had, among other purposes, that of creating work for the poor.<sup>xlv</sup> The system of “indoor relief” resulted in “the idle poor [being] taken into the poor-house or work-house where they would be set to work;” this stands in contrast to the other practice of “outdoor relief,” or the provision of money, food, clothing, or other goods to paupers.<sup>xlvi</sup> Although it was not the main system of poor relief, as noted by Mark D. Herber in *Ancestral Trails*, indoor relief did contribute to the overall system of English welfare.<sup>xlvii</sup> The idea of setting the poor to work would reach new heights by the 19th century; the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 completely “replaced outdoor relief for the able-bodied poor by compulsory indoor relief in workhouses.”<sup>xlviii</sup> Slack makes the point that ceding control to local governments was a key part of making poor relief effective in England, and Bloy explains that 1572 marked the passage of the first act that made poor relief a “local responsibility.”<sup>xlix</sup> The *Contract with America* echoes this idea, claiming that “the best welfare solutions come from the states, not Washington, D.C.”<sup>1</sup> The language of the PRWORA specifically gives “flexibility” to the states in how they maintain their TANF funds and programs; although Republicans had other reasons for insisting on this change to American welfare, their recognition of local solutions as being more fit for the citizens of a particular era certainly looked back to the policies of the English.<sup>li</sup>

Aside from the practices and recommendations, Republican thought shared a lot in common with the dominant welfare philosophies in England. Like Gingrich, English lawmakers in these times saw poverty as a problem that was affecting not only the poor but English society as a whole.<sup>lii</sup> One example of this is the negative attitude towards poor people who disrupted society’s workings, described by P.J.P. Goldberg as a “growing contemporary concern with vagrancy.”<sup>liii</sup> This mirrors the perception of Gingrich and his colleagues that poverty was destroying American culture. Paternalism was also evident in English poor law; Slack observes that many English felt they had a duty to engage in “social engineering” and to encourage the “moral reform” of the poor.<sup>liv</sup> Although the passage of Poor

Laws in 1597 and 1601 provided for a governmental framework for poor relief, it was a general English attitude beforehand that “the church was considered to have moral responsibility for the poor.”<sup>lv</sup> The only real change to this philosophy effected by the Poor Law was its intent that poor relief be “directed to particular rational ends” and that charity go beyond “the traditional obligations of the rich towards the poor.”<sup>lvi</sup> Slack summarizes the perspective of many English thinkers in writing, “if idleness were rooted out, drunkards, bastard-bearers, hedge-breakers, and other rogues would disappear. Poverty itself might be conquered along with ungodliness, if only there were sufficient investment in social engineering.”<sup>lvii</sup>

Punitive practices were also more extreme in early-modern England when compared with those advocated by American conservatives. While Republican reformers sought to “deter potential TANF recipients,” the English methods for deterring bad behavior under the poor relief system were more brutal. Slack’s survey of English laws from 1531 to 1610 shows many acts that call for the whipping of vagabonds, the sanction of slavery as a punishment, and the use of “houses of correction.”<sup>lviii</sup> Perhaps most interesting is how later English perspectives on the failing of the Poor Law coincide with the Republican views of America’s “liberal welfare state.” It has been noted that the PRWORA focused heavily on the need to change welfare and foster the “promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood.”<sup>lix</sup> This parallels Slack’s view of 19th century Englishmen such as Thomas Malthus. According to Malthus and the Royal Commission of 1832, the system of poor relief “encouraged pauperization by subsidizing early marriage, large families and low wages.”<sup>lx</sup> Furthermore, Herber explains that “many people also believed that the system encouraged people to avoid work,” thus leading to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.<sup>lxi</sup>

The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 carried with it the ideas of work requirements and local control of “poor relief,” as well as attitudes of paternalism and punitive action against the “undeserving poor.” One of the most striking aspects of

the old English philosophy surrounding poor relief is how many of its principle tenets were echoed by Gingrich and his colleagues during the welfare reform of the 1990s. Under the administration of President Clinton, congressional Republicans oversaw the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. This act fundamentally altered American welfare, providing for state control, work requirements for welfare recipients, and time limits on welfare. Whether the welfare reform spurred by the PRWORA will be ultimately effective remains unclear, and so the study of both this movement and its ideological ancestors will remain an important subject for years to come.

## ENDNOTES

- i. Katznelson, et al. (268)
- ii. Clinton, quoted in Katznelson (267)
- iii. O'Connor (158)
- iv. O'Connor (185)
- v. Ibid.
- vi. O'Connor (209)
- vii. Katznelson et al. (176)
- viii. O'Connor (200)
- ix. O'Connor (206-207)
- x. O'Connor (212)
- xi. Ibid.
- xii. "TANF Fact Sheet." October 2006.  
<[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opa/fact\\_sheets/tanf\\_factsheet.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opa/fact_sheets/tanf_factsheet.html)>
- xiii. PRWORA Title I, Part A, Sec. 401(a)
- xiv. PRWORA Title I, Part A, Sec. 401(a)(2)
- xv. O'Connor (201)
- xvi. The New York Times, "Firebrand Who Got Singed Says Being Speaker Suffices," 1/22/96
- xvii. The Washington Post, "Gingrich Divided GOP, Conquered the Agenda," 12/21/94
- xviii. O'Connor (207)
- xix. O'Connor (208)
- xx. Gingrich 1995 (71)
- xxi. O'Connor (207)
- xxii. Gingrich, quoted in O'Connor (207)
- xxiii. Rogers-Dillon (30)
- xxiv. Rogers-Dillon (121)
- xxv. Piven and Cloward (22)
- xxvi. O'Connor (217)
- xxvii. O'Connor (213)
- xxviii. Gillespie and Schellhas (65)
- xxix. PRWORA Title I. Sec. 101(8)
- xxx. PRWORA Title I, Part A, Sec. 401(a)
- xxxi. O'Connor (214)
- xxxii. Gingrich (29)
- xxxiii. Gingrich (31)
- xxxiv. "Gingrich Divided GOP," 12/21/94
- xxxv. Gingrich, quoted in "Gingrich Divided GOP," 12/21/94
- xxxvi. Drew, quoted in O'Connor (213)
- xxxviii. O'Connor (213)
- xxxix. Piven and Cloward (436)
- xl. Piven and Cloward (438)
- xli. Piven and Cloward (439-440)
- xl.ii. Piven and Cloward (261)
- xl.iii. Slack (18)
- xl.iv. Ibid.
- xl.v. Slack (27)
- xl.vi. Bloy,  
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/poorlaw/elizpl.html>>
- xl.vii. Herber (288)
- xl.viii. Ibid.
- xl.ix. Slack (20) and Bloy  
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/poorlaw/elizpl.html>>
- l. Gillespie and Schellhas (73)
- li. PRWORA Title I, Part A, Sec. 401(a)
- lii. Slack (15)
- liii. Goldberg (214)
- liv. Slack (15)
- lv. Herber (287)
- lvi. Slack (14, 15)
- lvii. Slack (24)
- lviii. Slack (59-61)
- lix. PRWORA Title I. Sec. 101(3)
- lx. Slack (54)
- lxi. Herber (301)

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