

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Welfare Reform & Beyond Public Forum

AMERICAN DREAM:

THREE WOMEN, TEN KIDS, AND A NATION'S DRIVE TO END WELFARE

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**PANEL 2: SCHOLARS AND REPORTERS**

[TRANSCRIPT PRODUCED FROM A TAPE RECORDING]

**Moderator:**

JODIE ALLEN, Managing Editor for Finance and Science, *U.S. News & World Report*

**Panel 2: Scholars and Reporters**

LEON DASH, Professor of Journalism and Afro-American Studies, U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

DEBRA DICKERSON, Author, *The End of Blackness*

MICKEY KAUS, Contributing Writer, *Slate*

LAWRENCE M. MEAD, Professor of Politics, New York University

**Question and Answer Session**

## **PROCEEDINGS**

MS. ALLEN: Again, I'm not going to spend much time introducing our panelists, but I will tell you just a little about them, since they are all good friends.

We're going to go in the order that is on your programs. We will start with Larry Mead, who is a professor of politics at NYU, where he teaches public policy and American government. Professor Mead has written extensively on poverty and welfare in the United States and has been very much involved in the welfare debate.

Next we will then have Leon Dash, my former colleague at the Washington Post, where he worked, with brief interruptions for such things as being in the Peace Corps and being a foreign correspondent. He worked for 30 years and piled up so many prizes that it would take a half an hour to describe them all, but among them was a Pulitzer.

After Leon, we will have Debra Dickerson, who is an award-winning essayist. Indeed, her essay "Who Shot Johnnie" has been anthologized and used in virtually every undergraduate composition course in the country. Her memoir, "An American Story," published in September 2000, was anointed the New York Times Notable Book. And her second book, "The End of Blackness," published less than a year ago, is already in its third printing. She has the further distinction of having preceded me at U.S. News & World Report as a senior editor.

And finally, wrapping up the presentations will be another old pal, Mickey Kaus, who--I can remember an enjoyable dinner with Mickey many years ago when he was setting about to write his much-read book on welfare in the 1980s and arguing that those of us in the Carter welfare debate, which at that point is not quite yet

ancient history, that those of us who had been on the jobs side of that argument had the better of the argument, at least conceptually if not in terms of our faring with the Congress at the time. His book, "The End of Equality," I think is particularly relevant to the current debate not only because it was an early text to favor the job reorientation of welfare, but because it also discussed very eloquently the problem of pursuing the traditional American ideal of social equality in a time when incomes are growing ever more unequal. Since that time, that trend has become so considerably more pronounced, to the extent that even that dogged capitalist, Alan Greenspan, has recently taken account of it, and certainly it is a perhaps neglected aspect of the welfare debate and what the next steps ought to be.

So, now, let us begin.

MR. MEAD: Thanks very much. It's a real pleasure to be here. I've written my own book on Wisconsin reform. It's called "Government Matters," published by Princeton University Press. There's a copy on the table outside. I'm not going to tell you what's in it. You're supposed to go out and buy it and make me rich. But I will apply a perspective from it to what Jason has done.

I agree with Jason's assessment. I'm a little surprised at that. I thought we might differ more than we have turned out to do. I agree that welfare reform is a step forward for most of the clients. It is, however, less central to the lives of the poor than many people might have imagined, and reform doesn't do much to deal with the family of the poor, particularly the problems of unwed pregnancy and fatherhood, which people have talked about.

So the reform is successful, but the reform is also incomplete. It seems to me we have to continue to rebuild welfare around work. That job isn't finished. There

are many states where the conversion of welfare to a work-based program has not occurred or not finished. Certainly that is true in New York. That's something that the reauthorization should accomplish if we can get past the details.

Secondly, we have to do more to raise the incomes of welfare mothers who are now employed. It's clear that they're struggling. They may be better off than before, but we want to help them. And their claims are greater now that they're employed.

And thirdly, most importantly, we have to find some way to reach the fathers. For the mothers we have offered a regime of what I would describe as help and hassle. We've given them new benefits, but we've also insisted that they work in return. We have to find a way to offer that same deal to the fathers. And it's tougher because they are not, many of them, in a benefits structure where we have the authority that comes from that to require them to work.

So there's agreement there. But I do think that a feature of Jason's book that should be focused on is that it is journalistic. And I mean that in the best sense of the word. That also means that its assessments are moralistic. By that I mean it takes the structure of policy and the structure of government more or less for granted, and it's within that structure that we find that people did or didn't do what they should have done.

Now, my analysis is focused much more on the structure itself. I'm interested in how we got to the policy and governmental structures that we see in Wisconsin and, to a lesser extent, around the country. We need to assess that structure in terms of past research and its actual effects. I find that the W-2 system in Wisconsin is well justified based on the research, although it is, I think, a little bit more severe than

they probably needed. Its overall effects are unquestionably positive. There's a lot of research on those. It's true that the family effects are certainly not as large as the reductions in dependency, the rise in employment, but they are still positive. Overall, anyway, we can say that good things are happening for families. Wisconsin was notable for the very high work levels that they achieved as a result of the reform. They not only drove people off the rolls, but also into employment.

But the other thing that I think we should focus on is how it was done. The really remarkable thing about Wisconsin is the political concordat that unified the parties in pursuing reform. The two sides were able to agree about the basis of reform, with Republicans spending new money on reform and new services, but Democrats being willing to give up entitlements, something that they haven't done in some other states.

The administration of reform was also extremely impressive. State and local officials implemented waves of reform programs. These programs also often had what I call a paternalistic character, where they supervised the clients closely and that seemed to be essential to their results.

Now, there were some problems in implementing reform in Milwaukee, which Jason talks about. Those certainly need to be noted. But nevertheless, work was enforced. The message did get out that work was now going to be a basis for getting any aid.

I agree with other speakers that the details finally didn't matter. Finally what mattered was the change in the message. And the remarkable thing was that the politics was crucial here. It wasn't just the implementation of the new policies. The message about work and self-reliance began to get out as soon as welfare became a

signal issue in the state in the mid-'80s, even before Thompson was elected as governor. And from that point, people began leaving the rolls, because they got a message about self-reliance before new policies were even enacted, let alone implemented. And then the implementation drove it home.

So in the end, politics and administration combined to produce the enforcement of work. And so, really, the key to the reform was not really policy, it was with the institutions. It was the politics of the administrative process that drove home a new reality to, first of all, the welfare system, and then the recipients.

Now, I also compare Wisconsin to a number of other states using case studies. And the Wisconsin story is not unparalleled. There are a number of other states that have done a good job of welfare reform. They tend to be, with virtually no exceptions, states with strong good-government traditions that have been well-governed for a long time, where politicians focus on problem-solving and not really on partisanship to the same extent as elsewhere. These states also had strong public administrations, so they were able to carry out the complicated tasks involved in welfare reform. Wisconsin, in other words, is one of a group of states that are able to execute this reform effectively.

The big-government states, urban big-government states like New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, these states have done less well generally, chiefly because they're more divided politically. They had deeper divisions about welfare and also their public administration isn't of the same quality. They have large and capable bureaucracies, but they're not enterprising.

What's remarkable about Wisconsin is how local welfare officials often took it on themselves to solve the welfare problem. They invented programs which they

then sold to the state and then to the nation and then to the world. And today, administrators from countries like New Zealand, Australia journey to places like Kenosha County, Grant County in Wisconsin to find out how to solve the welfare problem. Literally, these local welfare officials have become world statesmen and stateswomen. It's really remarkable.

So that enterprising quality is the thing you don't find in the big urban states generally. And in the South, although there's less political division about reform, there's also less bureaucratic capability. These states don't have the bureaucratic forces to do the job, at least not initially, and they've had to gear up and deal with many problems.

So my conclusion is that, yes, reform is successful, but reform is ultimately limited by the capacity of our institutions. That's also true in Washington, where the degree of division about these matters, as we've just seen--although it's closing; I think there's more consensus today. Nevertheless, you don't have the degree of consensus that you found in Wisconsin. There are significant political divisions. And in many states we don't have the same capacity to implement programs that we see in Wisconsin.

So I think, finally, we have to look past policy. Governmental capacity. That's the thing that we ultimately look to when we want to solve the poverty problem. That's what we need in order to restructure the lives of the people that Jason has written about in order to make it possible for them to imagine the American dream. We've been accustomed to seeing welfare and poverty as economic problems. That's the way they're usually discussed. But in terms of solutions, in terms of changing the world so that a dream is imaginable, it seems to me that, really, politics is the master science.



MS. ALLEN: Thank you very much, Larry.

Next we will hear from Leon.

MR. DASH: Good morning. Jason DeParle's "American Dream" captures the inter-generational poverty of the black poor and their continued isolation. The book stretches back six generations to emancipation from slavery, to serfdom as sharecroppers in the cotton- and tobacco-growing South, and finally, in the decades following World War II, up through the second great migration north in search of jobs and the promise of a better life.

Many African Americans were able to break out of the patterns of poverty in the post-war years and the fortunate ones were swept up into the large growth of the black middle class after the 1960s. But "American Dream" focused on those left behind, the black poor, in their daily struggle to survive and the impact of Clinton's welfare law on their marginal existence.

I have spent years looking at urban black poverty and I find everything DeParle writes about in the lives of Opal Caples, Jewell Reed, and Angie Jobe, their children and their men, to be consistent with the stories I learned first-hand. In the words of Sheryll Cashin in her recently published "The Failures of Integration," the African American poor are the only group who suffer in America today hypersegregation and its consequences in disproportionate numbers--poor schools, marginal employment, adolescent child-bearing, a high incidence of AIDS infection, criminal recidivism, substance abuse, and communal violence. In every city I visit, the specific isolation of the black poor has created identical pathologies wherever the black poor are purposely concentrated. Even in the small Midwest university-dominated twin

cities--Champaign-Urbana, Illinois--where I now live, I've been able to pick up identical patterns of survival and existence in the two cities' north-end ghettos.

By the time we reach the year 2004 in "American Dream," Angie and Jewell are no longer on welfare and have joined the working poor. Each woman holds on tightly to one thin thread that may pull them into the American dream--well-paying jobs. But that's a distance away. The third woman, Opal, is in the debilitating throes of crack addiction and has had all of her children taken away from her.

While Angie and Jewell may seem to be two success stories of welfare reform, DeParle makes it clear that their lives are still in the margins:

"Trading welfare checks for pay stubs," DeParle writes, "Angie and Jewell stake a moral claim to a greater share of the nation's prosperity and enter an economy that gave the common worker less and less."

DeParle's observation makes it clear that the former welfare recipients, especially the black poor, will be paid less and less in relative terms for their labor. What chance will they have in the long run of every achieving the American dream? Moreover, with the Clinton administration's ending of welfare as we knew it, there seem to be examples cropping up that indicate a drop in our commitment to help the Angies and the Jewells scuffling to live day-to-day.

For example, where I live, in Champaign County, Illinois, I have my students following the county's plan to demolish by the end of the year two large public housing projects. Both projects were dominated by the welfare poor up into the mid-1990s and are occupied today by the marginally employed. The county is offering these residents Section 8 vouchers, or housing subsidies, to rent houses and apartments that are already occupied. No new housing stock for low-income people. New housing is for

sale at market prices starting at \$300,000--way out of their reach--and the owners of newly constructed rental apartments refuse to rent to people with Section 8 vouchers.

So where do these people go, I and my students ask. County officials have no answer--they duck and dodge and run from us when they see us coming--except to say they must leave the public housing or be evicted in the middle of this winter. I don't know if any of you have been in the winter in the Midwest, but the first winter I lived out there, in '98, it went to 37 below zero. So that's what these people face.

While the welfare law has reduced the welfare rolls, the question of how best to help the poor, particularly the despised and feared black poor, remains an American dilemma.

Thank you.

MS. ALLEN: Thank you, Leon.

Debra?

MS. DICKERSON: It wasn't cold out there, but it's cold up here. So I'll try not to shiver.

I was wondering when I was listening to Congressman Shaw talk, when he spoke to those welfare recipients who were looking at the floor and exhibiting such low self-esteem, I was wondering if it was after he had given the same kind of little pep talk he gave here today when he described them as being on the last plantation and that welfare was evil and when he basically communicated that it was a despicable thing to be getting a couple hundred dollars a month from the federal government. I just wondered if their shucking and jiving in his presence might have had something to do with the very heavy-handed demonization that welfare recipients face in this country.

I think it's interesting that we talk about Angie and Jewell transitioning to work when Jason makes clear that they had always worked.

I come from the working class. My parents were Great Migration sharecroppers. We were never on welfare. We tried once in the stagflation '70s when my father was dead and my mother's factory was closed and she lost her cleaning job, and we were told that we were not in financial need. So that was the one time. But I've had two siblings who were on welfare when they had illegitimate children, and they always worked. I have innumerable cousins who've been on and off welfare, and they've always worked. Food stamps, you saw them around all the time, but everybody always worked.

So it's interesting this notion about transitioning from welfare to work. It's just about impossible to live on what welfare pays you. I'm sort of amazed by the way we talk about these things, especially in places like Mississippi. It's very, very difficult. So this communal aspect of poor black lives, which has been well-documented, is a necessity. And we've talked about liberals saying that welfare recipients are going to end up sleeping on grates and look at that--silly liberals--they didn't end up sleeping on grates. But they ended up 17 to an apartment at one point in the story of Angie and Jewell, a cockroach-infested ghetto apartment.

So, you know, it was always astounding to me the energy that we put into welfare reform when it was such a pittance in the budget, and the way, I think, that we in the ruling class use this as a way to change the subject from all the other things that we're not getting done in this country.

Representative Shaw also talked about making marriageable men who are hanging out on the street. Is that why the majority of black men are not

marriageable? I think there's a little bit more--obviously, he was speaking off the cuff, but this is serious stuff. It pains me to hear poor people, who never had a shot at a good education, at a stable home life--you know, it's hard to have good self-esteem when every message you get is that you don't matter. You know, we're going to spend money on locking you up. We got all the money we need for the criminal justice system. We got all the money we need for the war in Iraq. But we got no money for childcare, we got no money for health care.

In the black community, I'm considered an apostate. I'm considered a horrible conservative in the black community. But this just makes my blood boil. I think this is a wonderful book. I think Jason did a fantastic job of showing the good, the bad, and the ugly on all sides. Where are we going to find the outrage about the money that got wasted in the incredibly sloppy management of some of these programs in Wisconsin? What about Enron? What about WorldCom? Where's the demonization of these people? Where's the cultural uprising about that? It's galling to me.

And when we talk about welfare recipients, you know, not feeling victimized--they don't have time to feel victimized. You will never find a more cynical group of people, people who just do not waste time--they don't bother, you know. In fact, they don't even discuss--you can't have a conversation. When I go home to the inner city, you can't have a conversation about that sort of thing. They just know that, okay, the government's going to give me \$500 a month? Okay, sure, I'll take it--on my way to my Kentucky Fried Chicken job or on my way to, you know, kitchen table--I've gotten my hair done at somebody's kitchen table for the last 25 years. I make it a point. These women, you know, they've got their kids over in a corner, doing hair. The kids are over in a corner, and because I'm the educated one, I'm checking homework while

somebody's doing my hair at their kitchen table. There's always a couple of houses on the block where there's some old grandmother babysitting 15, 20 kids--off the books, you know, getting welfare. She's on the plantation? She needs to be rescued and what she needs is to have her housing subsidy taken away? That's the rescue mission?

So I think the problem with--and I'm a supporter, but I'm so ticked off at some of the things I've heard here this morning. The way that this debate is framed such that poor people are supposed to feel guilty for being railroaded into a life that--yes, by superhuman effort I escaped the working class. I have five siblings who did not. And the reason is because I was given a chance to go to a gifted school. I always put it that I got an education intended for a white person, and that's the difference between me and my siblings. They work every day and they have no education--they graduated from high school, which is what we ask them to do, and my brother's a security guard, thank you very much; my sisters are receptionists and low-level government workers. Receptionists get fired all the time with all the downsizing and all, that right now one of my sisters has two of my other sisters living with her and a total of about six kids.

So, no, they're not sleeping on a grate. And they're not getting welfare. They're not getting anything. And whatever self-esteem problems they have come from the constant communication that they receive that you better accept nothing and you better not get out of line.

MS. ALLEN: Mickey?

MR. KAUS: I've got to play my usual role as designated schmuck.

[Laughter.]

MR. KAUS: There's some guy early in Jason's book, some idiot says that ideas are interesting, people are boring. I have a feeling that was me. And Jason's one

of the few people who have actually made people in welfare stories interesting. I was gripped from, like, page 7, and I didn't expect to be. I think it's a really great book. It weaves the policy and the people together better than any other book I've seen, including Nick Lemann's book, which is also a great book.

He knows I'm going to make this objection to him, but I think the book still suffers from what you might call the -- fallacy, which is he's looked at people who are on welfare when welfare reform passes and sees what happens to them, and two of them do okay, one of them falls in a horrible pit of poverty and degradation. He doesn't look at the people who, because of welfare reform, because welfare was ended, don't go on welfare because they say, as many people do in the book, hey, if I gotta take a job, I'm gonna get a job myself. Those people--it would be very hard to study those people because they don't go on welfare, you can't find them in a central place.

There are ways to study them, though, and I think, if I had a major critique of the book, it's it doesn't do--you could look at what happens in their communities. Where are the people who would have been on welfare if welfare still existed? What are they doing now? What do the local church leaders say about them?

There was a famous controversy that Jason participated in over a bus driver in Milwaukee who said he saw people on his bus he'd never seen before. They were going to work in the morning, where previously his bus hadn't had those people in the morning. Talk to those people. That dimension is, I think, still missing in the book.

That said, Jason convinced me that there's a whole lot--things that Debra said--there's a whole lot more work going on, even among people on welfare, than I thought at the time welfare passed. The real comparison is the culture of the three-legged stool he outlines, which is welfare, the work under the table, and the help from

friends, boyfriends and family. Is that a better or worse economic culture than the post-reform culture of eliminate the welfare part, just rely on work and family? And I think that's the question we don't know the answer to yet.

Why am I disappointed in welfare reform? I thought there was going to be a race to the top. I didn't think there was going to be a race to the bottom, but I thought politicians would be competing with each other to do the best program possible. That hasn't happened. I thought that would drive them to have large workfare programs. Not only has that not happened, but Jason is pretty convincing that some of the work programs that I thought were existing had a slight Potemkin quality to them.

And I expected that what Clinton said--and this echoes something of what Debra and other people have said--Clinton expected us to usher in a new progressive era and now that we're only helping the working poor and not the welfare poor, people should be more generous. The EITC is very generous, but the other obvious things that you would want to do that Bruce Reed talked about to be more generous haven't happened.

The obvious big problems are the men. Everybody's talked about the men. And something I'm surprised Leon Dash didn't talk about, which is the fact that time and time again in Jason's book it's clear that women--the reason women have children out of wedlock is not because they don't know birth control, it's not because Norplant is not available. The reason they have the babies is because at some level they want the babies. And Leon's article is the first article I read that convinced me that that was the case.

So those, I think, are the two big social problems that have yet to be dealt with: What do we do about the men in these women's lives, how do we integrate them



into the economy; and how do we end a life in which having a baby out of wedlock is the only way to feel that you have some meaningful role to play?

I do think there are positive trends. I think Jason's summary of his own book was too pessimistic. There are some cases where the isolation of the ghetto has been breached. There's one woman who goes to a hospital in a white area. She'd never been surrounded by white people before. I assume that as people search for jobs, not only are they led out of their isolation but they're going to get better jobs. One thing that struck me is you don't have to work at the Budgetel. There are better jobs than the Budgetel that you can do, and these people's horizons just sort of have to be broadened.

The rise in marriage is not chopped liver. It goes from 20 percent of kids raised in homes with married people to 23. It doesn't sound like much, but this isn't a trend that's easy to turn around. This is a huge ocean liner that hasn't changed for decades in the right direction. Now it's changed a little bit in the right direction. Even if half of them are stepfathers, it's still in the right direction.

On page 305, there's a key point that suggests that the story of welfare reform might just be beginning around page 305, not ending. And it's where one of the characters says, Us women that just got off W-2 can't make it out here by ourselves. People are recognizing the need for a second breadwinner.

My hope was that eventually work itself would lead to fathers being forced to take a more active, positive role. We don't need a fatherhood program that tries to sort of spend some government money propagandizing. I'm not against it, but I think work itself is the fatherhood program.

And I think there are some signs that an anti-welfare culture is growing. One of the daughters--I think it's Jewell's daughter Kesha--has a baby out of wedlock

and she has no intention of going on welfare. I think that's a positive development.

Others may disagree.

Things I would like to know about. I'd like to know what percent of the vast increase in labor force participation was just people who had worked under the table getting smoked out and now being official and what percent were the people Clay Shaw talked about, who didn't know about work and suddenly became acquainted with the world of work. That's a question that some labor market economist can answer. I just don't know the answer to it. But that affects how we see the reform.

The sharecropper controversy could be solved by figuring out what percentage of people in the underclass were sharecroppers. Everybody talks about, well, a lot of sharecroppers succeeded. Well, did the sharecroppers that failed make up all the underclass? That's the question I never see answered.

The two big reforms that Bruce talked about, it seems sort of--he talks about we need some big reforms as the next step. The two obvious ones suggested by Jason's book are, one, drug legalization. It may hurt in suburban white areas, middle-class areas, black middle-class areas where people would be exposed to drugs who aren't exposed to drugs, but it sure would help in the ghetto, where it would eliminate the idea that selling drugs is what black men do, which is what one of the characters in the book says. It would eliminate that possibility.

The second thing is doing something about immigration. You want to give good jobs to black men? It seems to me we have a national obligation to take care of them first before we take care of the good hardworking people who come across our border from the south. Let's stop the driving down of wages at the lower end of the labor market so we can get wages up, and have people who are Americans now and who

don't have access to good-paying jobs and aren't marriageable, give them a chance to make a decent wage at a low-skilled job.

MS. ALLEN: Thank you, Mickey.

I don't know whether to feel optimistic or pessimistic. I must say that Leon and Debra left me feeling more pessimistic. But I do agree with Mickey that this is a huge ocean liner. Its construction extends very far back in the darker pages of American history. And any signs of movement in a more positive direction are to be welcomed.

But the pessimism that I feel comes from remarks that Leon made, reminding us that this is--well, I think all of the panelists agree more investments are needed, that Congress and the public were only too happy to pocket the savings and not to make the follow-up expenditures that had been expected by people who supported reform, that in this current time of enormous budget deficits, preoccupation with foreign wars, aggravated by the forces of globalization which, as we know, are making unskilled or lesser-skilled jobs ever scarcer, plus continued influx of immigrants competing for those jobs. You put that all together and you would be amazed that things aren't getting worse rather than at least holding, apparently, their own. I'm not sure about that, but I think the evidence is that poverty, while the numbers have looked up some, we've not had the dire results that were expected.

So you can find grounds for both optimism and pessimism. But I would like to ask each of the panelists to briefly add to their remarks in that context. Do you think the forces at the moment are more dismal or is there any room for hope in addressing what everyone agrees are the missing parts of this reform?

MS. DICKERSON: I don't see America having--I don't see America caring that much about the people at the bottom. I think that the change is going to have to come from the bottom up. I am in a process of moving the focus of my work into one of the projects where I live in Albany, New York, and I'm working on stimulating a renaissance around the country at that sort of level. I have no faith that the rest of America really cares about anything beyond locking up the poor or ignoring them, sending them off to the military, which is a much less good option than it used to be. And that was another engine of my own uplift, is to talk you into the military.

I think that if the change doesn't come from people like me going back to the inner city, it won't come.

MR. DASH: I go around doing a lot of work and research in the State of Illinois, central Illinois, really. And something that is consistent with every city that I visit on the East Coast is in Illinois--and every city that I visited on the West Coast--is that the school systems that serve the poor do not educate them. And that is consistent throughout the country. Whether it's the urban poor or the rural poor, it's the same. Whether you're white growing up in rural poverty or black growing up in urban poverty, you're not being given a basic academic education.

When I look at the men--I've got a couple of students doing long-term prison projects--the men locked up in prison, more than 50 percent of the U.S. prison population is made up of black men. We're 13 percent of the entire U.S. population. All the men will boast about having not dropped out of school until the 10th or 11th grade. But when we look at their reading levels, their reading levels are between the 3rd and 4th grade.

Most educators know that up until the 3rd grade, you're learning to read; after the 3rd grade, you're reading to learn. So how do you even get to a 10th, 11th grade level reading at a 3rd grade level? That means you were warehoused, socially promoted. And then, in almost every instance, the vice principal called you to the office and told you you were too old to any longer be in the school that you were attending. And your reason for attending at that point was the social contacts among your peers or the free lunch or the free breakfast that were given to you if you qualified as a poor person.

So to me, the entire problem is really exemplified by the lack of a commitment in any public school system to devote resources. Granted, they come mostly from property taxes paid by the middle class. But there's no real commitment that I have seen to educate poor people, particularly poor black people. So I don't have a great deal of optimism.

MR. KAUS: To my mind, the question is are ghettos across the country becoming better places or worse places. Jason looks at part of that, what happens to people who are on welfare when reform was passed. He doesn't answer the larger question. My educated impression is that, although what Leon said there about the schools seems completely accurate, ghettos are becoming better places. Crime is going down, work is going up, incomes are going up. They're still not great places, but they're better places.

MR. MEAD: I'm optimistic. I wrote a book in the early '90s that predicted that, if we enforced work in welfare, the effect would be actually to shift the political agenda to the left. And I think that's happened. Because when the welfare poor go to work, they become more deserving, their claims on government strengthen. This is

opposite of the way economists think of it. They think that it's people with less income who should get more from government. When you go to work, you typically have more income, but you also much greater claims on the body politic because you are functioning in ways that we expect that citizens will do.

And I think that's happened. I think as reform has succeeded but it's evident that tasks remain, the shift has been to the middle, particularly on the part of the Republicans. And we think of the current administration as very conservative on account of its Iraq policy and their tax cuts and their environmental policy, but on social policy, you know, Bush is a moderate and has actually been positioning himself in the middle. He ran for office initially as a compassionate conservative and I think he's been true to that position. The No Child Left Behind school reform was very ambitious. I agree it's troubled. It has problems that need to be fixed. But it involves a serious commitment, new money, serious change that's favorable to the learning of low-income children and other children. In his speech accepting the Republican nomination a couple of weeks ago, the president proposed additional measures in the areas of job training, community colleges.

The reason is that if you now say to the welfare recipients that they have to work, then you are casting your lot with the job market. You're saying this is how people are going to get income today. We're not going to provide for them outside the market, or it will be as a supplement to what they earn. It will not be a substitute for earnings. Once you say that, the spotlight shifts to the question of how good the jobs are. There's a lot of debate in this campaign about that, about whether jobs are good enough, particularly for low-skilled people. The question of the jobs going overseas is actually less serious for them than it is for better-off workers because the service jobs

that most former welfare recipients get are not likely to be exported to India or China. So their jobs are reasonably secure. The question is, rather, should the wages be increased or the benefits increased.

So when you eliminate welfare as a major social concern, that shifts the focus very sharply towards employment policy and all the issues surrounding. That's why it's such a subject in the campaign, and the president's responding.

Now, it's true to say we haven't yet had a major new program aimed at this. Clearly the earned income tax credit has to be considered, and the minimum wage and other things that might raise the earnings of those at the bottom, especially the health care questions, another aspect of that same issue. So all of this is getting on the agenda. I don't believe it would have done if reform had not occurred in welfare. Because then we'd be talking still about a group that was outside the labor force. Now that most of them are in, the dialogue changes. And that, it seems to me, is very hopeful.

MS. ALLEN: Questions from the audience.

QUESTION: I think this is a wonderful book. I've read it twice and probably will read it again. It's a great book about the underclass. But I'd just like people to comment on basically the point that Mickey Kaus made, that a -- orientation doesn't really represent the sum total of welfare reform. As someone who played a role in the conservative ranks in crafting this legislation, I think among most conservatives the over-arching goal, the paramount goal in the early 1990s was to prevent the expansion of the underclass, which is so masterfully documented in this book.

And if we look back then, we had the out-of-wedlock-childbearing rate growing at 1 percentage point per annum, having risen from 7 percent in the '60s up to over 30 percent by the mid-1990s. Our goal was not to reach families like Angie Jobe

that are described in this book. In fact, I would have said at that time that these families would not be affected by welfare reform. Their employment actually astonishes me. I would have expected them to be stuck, at best, in public service jobs for the rest of their lives. But the idea that you were going to reach families that had been in the underclass for multiple generations, that we're going to affect them with a TANF work requirement, I think, would have been laughable.

What we were trying to do was in fact prevent the expansion of the underclass. And I think that the key indicator there is that the out-of-wedlock-childbearing rate, which is the predominant indicator, was rising 1 percentage point a year and has now flattened out. That is a huge, huge victory. It's a defensive victory, but it's, again, far better. If you'd asked, I think, most conservatives in the early '90s can we stop that trend, and certainly can we stop it with a work-phased welfare reform, we would say no--we've got to try, but we can't even do it.

So I think that there's a huge, huge change that's going on here on the margins, but it's kind of off-scene of the book. It's the underclass that might have come into existence, the expansion of the underclass which is not, in part because of the message effects in this reform.

If everybody could just comment on that.

MS. ALLEN: Not everybody, because we don't have time. Mickey's already made that point, so--

MR. KAUS: The point that Belle Sawhill has made, actually, in her articles on this is that the message of responsibility emanating at welfare reform, although it was aimed at employment, also had an effect on family. It sobered up welfare mothers to realize that they face a life of employment and therefore they should



be careful about having children and they should be careful about becoming a single mother in particular. That's something they should avoid. And we have seen some movement. Not only do we see a reduction in the pregnancy rate, but we also see a rise in marriage and cohabitation among people who are low-income.

So it may not be that the father's going to work. It could also be the father's taking care of the kids while the mother goes to work. But the father is more likely to be back in the family. So all the trend is--I think turning around the steamship is a good image, it's going to take awhile to do it, but the steamship is indeed turning. And we need to complete that by addressing the fatherhood issue.

MR. DASH: Well, I don't see the families characterized in Jason's book as members of the underclass, I see them as members of the poor. To me, the thing that distinguishes the subset of the underclass within the poor is that the entire family is engaged in criminal enterprise and cycling in and out of the prison system. Here you don't have that. You have the men going in and out of the prison system for various violations, but not the mothers. So I don't really see this as a book about the underclass.

QUESTION: I had a question, I think, for Mr. Dash and Ms. Dickerson. And I want to thank you, Ms. Dickerson, for your honest and clear commentary today. My question is about what's taken for granted in this discussion. Bruce Reed mentioned that he would change the Clinton motto to bringing back fatherhood as we knew it. And I guess I want to get your comments about the fatherhood and marriage-promotion proposals that are included in this welfare reauthorization discussion.

And I wonder just what fatherhood are we talking about--whose fathers are we talking about and what kind of families are we talking about? Because it seems to me that there is a lack of understanding, as you pointed out, about who these people

really are. And we hear that language used a lot, "these people," "those people," and I just kind of wanted to get your perspective and feedback on that.

MS. DICKERSON: Well, I think some people have been more careful than others today about not trivializing the contribution of women to keep these families going. And I try not to be Pavlovian about this focus on fathers, fathers, fathers. You know, what about the mothers? I think it would be better if we talked about two-parent families as opposed to bringing back fatherhood as if what women do is, you know, insufficient in some way. But it's a minor point. But I think as we go out, let's try to talk about two-parent families and not fathers.

I did an article for U.S. News in '98 about a gang truce in Southeast D.C., Benning Terrace. And what was amazing about this was these guys had been killing each other for a long time for reasons no one could remember. A group of older black men who had come through all this--many of them had been in prison, drugs, all that stuff--and they went in and they brokered a truce pretty much like that [snaps fingers]. And they just asked these guys what would it take for you to stop killing each other? And in a very short order, these guys were talking about jobs, how they couldn't get jobs.

And so the guy who ran the housing project--I don't know if he still does, because I moved from D.C. two years ago--he read about it in the paper and he called up and he said what can I do? And so he ended up hiring all these guys. And they went from, you know, the hoods and the gloves and the, you know, selling crack, to \$6 and \$7 an hour jobs. And the first day I went to report on this piece, one of the guys who ran--the older guys, the concerned men -- wanted to pick me up at the Metro station. He's driving me to the complex, and as we got near the complex, black men, 18, 19, 22 years old, were chasing the car saying I'm ready to work, where is my job?

So if you want men to get married and be fathers, all this stuff demonizing them hanging out on the corners--what else are they supposed to do? They've not been educated, the police lock them up just with very little provocation. What are they supposed to do? These guys are chasing cars, ready to work for \$6 and \$7 an hour, but they couldn't because they had a record and they had poor life skills, that sort of thing. Until we address the education and where are these jobs that these men are supposed to take, and supply health care for their families, that's the kind of--I think we've--there's a certain kind of fatherhood that has not been well-known in particular segments of the black community, but can be learned. And I think once they've got jobs, they can do that. They very quickly get into this Leave It To Beaver mode. It's kind of amazing to watch.

MS. ALLEN: Well, our timekeeper says that we are out of time. But we will take one more question.

QUESTION: For Debra. What are you going to be doing in Albany?

MS. DICKERSON: I haven't exactly decided. I have a law degree. When I went to law school I thought I was going to do community development work, but I started writing in law school and I thought, well, that's my community development work because I write about these kinds of issue. But 10 years on, I'm ready to combine community development work and writing.

So I haven't quite decided. One of the things I learned through this gang-truce piece is that people in poor communities know what they need. They don't need me to come in with my fancy degrees and say this is the program I'm going to run. Because they thought the problem was violence and crime in this community and it was lack of jobs, and so that's what they focused on in Benning Terrace.

Because I do get my hair done -- my beautician is from the Dominican Republic. They're black Hispanic and their English is very poor. And their credit card machine hasn't worked for 18 months. And so finally I asked the woman why--you know, I really would like to use my credit card, it's much more convenient. The thing is broken, and she can't communicate with them. They keep charging her the monthly fees, but no one's fixed it. So, you know, I brokered that and I got that taken care of, so now all these little small-business people are coming to me with things.

So the guy who runs the housing authority in Albany is a very forward-thinking guy and he's--I'm setting up an office there. And there's a lot of community development work. We just got a very progressive district attorney who won the primary there who's probably going to take office in November. So we're trying to start a wave of progressive, grassroots, fundamental change in the inner city there, which is pretty small. So I think I'm going to be doing stuff to help local entrepreneurs.

MS. ALLEN: Thank you all for coming. Let's thank our excellent panel.

[Applause.]