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Michael Wiseman

Work over Welfare: The Inside Story of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law, by Ron Haskins. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2006, 450 pp., \$32.95 hardcover.

MEMOIRS OF A WELFARE WARRIOR

August 22, 2006, marked the tenth anniversary of President Clinton's signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, called, as Washington insists, PRWORA. PRWORA famously replaced welfare as we knew it, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Welfare policy history is told in many books; *Work over Welfare* is surely one of the best and most likely to become part of the enduring record of what many consider a watershed event in American social policy. Students of the policy-making process, the Congress, welfare programs, and welfare policy analysis should read it. This review tells why, and counsels caution—not about buying the book, but about buying the story.

The author, Ron Haskins, is a senior fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution and a consultant at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. From 1986 to 2000, he was a staff member of the Resources Subcommittee of the Ways and Means Committee of the House of Representatives, first as welfare counsel to the Republican staff and eventually as staff director. He held the director post during the struggle over welfare reform that erupted during the Clinton administration's first term. As is widely appreciated and absolutely confirmed by this book, Haskins served as architect, strategist, tactician, contractor, and day-and-night laborer in building the new law that the House of Representatives and Senate passed with extraordinary bipartisan majorities. No one is more qualified to write an "inside story" on the legislative politics and process of welfare reform. Haskins delivers what the book's subtitle promises.

The first of 15 chapters sets the stage by outlining American social policy at the beginning of the 1990s, identifying liberal (mostly Democratic) and conservative (mostly Republican) perspectives, summarizing key issues, and listing six factors that contributed to making 1996 the "moment of reckoning" when national social policy made a "complete U-turn." The issues were long-term dependency and illegitimacy; the former and even possibly the latter were linked to separation of benefits from work. Contributing factors were (1) the failure of prior reform efforts, most notably the Family Support Act of 1988, to reorient public assistance toward work; (2) President Clinton's emphasis during the 1992 campaign on the need for radical "welfare reform—ending welfare as we know it"; (3) Republican seizure of

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control of both chambers of Congress in the 1994 mid-term election; (4) the availability of draft Republican reform legislation when the 104th Congress convened in 1995; (5) a core group of House Republican leaders with both experience and expertise in welfare reform and commitment to see the job done; and (6) Republican control of key governorships. Exploration of these elements is done in the context of a chronology of the struggle over welfare reform during the period between Clinton's election in 1992 and August 1996.

On January 4, 1995, the opening day of the 104th Congress, a group of over 100 Republican congresspersons, led by Representative Clay Shaw of Florida, introduced H.R. 4, the "Personal Responsibility Act of 1995." The bill was part of the "Contract for America" promoted by Congressman Newt Gingrich. Chapters 2–5 chart the internecine struggle among Republicans over the objectives and strategy of the reform effort. Haskin highlights two conflicts. The first was between those, like himself, who considered rigorous emphasis on work to be the key objective, and others, generally further right on the political spectrum, who targeted illegitimacy. The second was the Republican congressional agenda and governors who were anxious to reduce federal involvement in state welfare policy while maximizing and ensuring federal funding as a state entitlement. The focus on illegitimacy was fervently promoted by a number of important figures, including Charles Murray, Robert Rector, and William Bennett. Murray's 1984 book, *Losing Ground*, posited as a "thought experiment" the complete elimination of welfare programs. While few in Congress appear to have supported the Murray proposal, what Haskins calls "Murray Light"—that is, restriction or elimination of benefits to unwed teen mothers—was a common element of most Republican proposals.

There's no mystery in *Work over Welfare*. From the beginning, every reader knows the outcome. What is gained are the insights into politics and procedure. Chapters 6–8 cover the evolution of H.R. 4 into H.R. 1214, the bill ultimately passed by the House on March 24. The trip moves through hearings, mark-ups first by the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and Means and then by the Committee itself, combined with related legislation approved by other House committees, hearings by the Rules Committee to determine procedures for full House debate and, finally, the debate itself. The tour is enriched with observations on interior decoration (the ceiling in room H-208 of the Capitol has a fitting military motif, given the political wars fought below), personalities (former Congressman Clay Shaw of Florida is judged a statesman, former Congressman Harold Ford of Tennessee is depicted as something considerably less), costume (lobbyists for tax and trade issues wear clothes three times as expensive as those of children's advocates), what distinguishes the House from the Senate ("a typical speech on the House floor lasts two or three minutes, the approximate time it takes a Senator to clear his throat"), and much more.

Haskins addresses Democratic (and some Republican) objections that, among other things: (1) The bill would hurt children; (2) Republicans were cutting welfare costs to pay for tax cuts; (3) without education and training, low-skilled welfare mothers could not hope to escape poverty; (4) insufficient support would be provided working families; and (5) (somewhat ironic), that the work requirements in the bill were too weak—a concession made by the Republican House leadership to the governors. Haskins confronts each argument cogently, if not always convincingly. Concern about children draws the most attention, but ultimately, Republicans were willing to take the risk:

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Republican bill did increase the risk that children could lose some benefits. But the point of the bill was to require, and

where necessary force, parents to become self-sufficient and leave the welfare rolls after a temporary stay. (p. 178)

The Senate was (and is) a different story from the House. Chapters 9–11 cover development of welfare reform legislation in the Senate during 1995. Haskins did not, of course, enjoy the same vantage point for the Senate debate that he occupied in the House, but he and the House leadership followed the debate closely and contributed as opportunity presented. The Senate chapters are very much about majority leader and presidential candidate Bob Dole. Initial reform legislation introduced by Oregon Senator Bob Packwood, chair of the Senate Finance Committee (with roughly the same jurisdiction as the House Ways and Means Committee), foundered due to controversy over what was considered to be inadequate attention to illegitimacy issues, funding for benefits, and child care. By summer 1995, Dole had assumed responsibility and, with assistance on the political right from Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, Dole began crafting a bill, negotiating on three fronts: with conservative Republicans on illegitimacy issues, with moderate Republicans concerned both with ensuring maintenance of effort by states once federal assistance changed to a block grant and with avoiding extreme illegitimacy sanctions, and with Democrats anxious to enhance work supports, including child care, without reducing work requirements. Provisions and amendments related to out-of-wedlock births were central to the debate, with conservative Republicans pushing for a Murray Light provision denying assistance to young mothers with children born out of wedlock and a “family cap” provision requiring states to deny an increase in benefits to unmarried women having additional children more than nine months after beginning to receive TANF. Both Murray Light and the family cap were ultimately dropped.

There were major differences between Senate and House versions of reform on provisions related to illegitimacy, state fiscal maintenance of effort (MOE), child care, restrictions on program staff size in the Department of Health and Human Services, allowing use of TANF funds to fund services provided by religious organizations, restrictive changes in the criteria used for assessing child eligibility for Supplemental Security Income, and continuation of the Earned Income Tax credit. While a conference committee immediately went to work on negotiating agreements, the process was eventually upstaged by the larger budget reconciliation process by which Republicans were attempting to bring about dramatic reductions in the size of federal government and a dramatic confrontation between congressional leadership and the White House over authority for continuing spending in the absence of a budget resolution. Eventually the impasse was broken, and Congress sent to President Clinton a reconciliation bill that included major welfare reform elements. The president vetoed the legislation.

During the impasse, work continued on sustaining interest on welfare reform and reconciling the Senate and House versions. Compromise was reached and both houses passed the revised welfare bill immediately, before Christmas. Despite a Haskins command tutorial at the White House on December 27 run for the president and vice president, the heads of OMB and several cabinet agencies, and the Republican and Democratic leaders from both houses (p. 266), the president vetoed the second welfare bill in January. Yet welfare reform was not dead, in large part because the governors were anxious to keep reform alive, at least insofar as block grants were concerned.

Chapters 12–14 follow revival of the revolution; confrontations with ecclesiastical, rhetorical, and analytic threats; and the president’s ultimate acquiescence. Led by

Michigan's John Engler and Wisconsin's Tommy Thompson, the governors began by issuing a reform proposal based largely on the bill that had previously passed the Senate. The governors were particularly interested in combining welfare reform with restructuring Medicaid in a single piece of legislation. The governors' approach was subject to withering criticism from the right for moderation in work requirements and failure to address illegitimacy aggressively.

Medicaid posed many problems. Attempting to address Medicaid issues both threatened the congressional consensus on reform and potentially provided a basis for a sustainable presidential veto. "The struggle to extract the welfare reform rabbit from the Medicaid briar patch," Haskins writes, "was the key to Republicans making progress on their reform agenda and to maintaining their congressional majorities" (p. 305). Compromises were engineered: The revised legislation included "maintenance of effort" requirements to ensure that states continued some semblance of fiscal contribution to welfare, but the family cap was made a state option, not a requirement.

Chapter 14 provides an hourly—and in places an almost minute-by-minute—description of the wind-up process that saw the House and Senate versions of reform reconciled in conference. *Inter alia*, the process saw Our Chronicler nearly run down on Independence Avenue by one of Washington's ubiquitous black Lincoln sedans and come virtually to blows with "a certain House Republican" anxious to add a provision (not identified) to the bill. The unidentified provision is "now part of the statutes of the United States" (p. 323). Such are the details of government.

Ultimately and after extensive White House discussion, President Clinton decided to sign the bill produced by the conference committee. Most cabinet members opposed the legislation. The president was ultimately persuaded to sign by Bruce Reed, "arguably his top advisor on welfare policy" and clearly Haskins' primary source for what transpired. "It was the fate of Bruce Reed to have the opportunity to bring all the welfare reform arguments together in an attempt to persuade the president . . . to sign the most important social legislation in at least half a century" (p. 327). Reed prevailed. In response, both the House and the Senate passed the legislation by commanding margins. PRWORA became law.

Haskins' final chapter surveys evidence on welfare reform's impacts, using "abundant and diverse" available information "to discover whether the apocalyptic predictions of the left have come to pass; whether children in poverty have increased by a million; and whether the positive effects envisioned by the right on employment, spending, and child well-being have come true" (p. 332). Here and in earlier chapters, Haskins is anxious to confront arguments made by reform opponents that the welfare changes promoted by Republicans would harm large numbers of children. There remain, according to Haskins, five big policy "challenges": (1) understanding why TANF caseloads did not increase during the 2000–2001 recession; (2) improving the functioning of all work support programs, including food stamps and child care; (3) helping low-income parents to find better jobs; (4) finding ways to assist those poor single parents who have left TANF but not found jobs; and (5) addressing the needs and responsibilities of poor fathers. Nevertheless, "sweeping reforms have produced sweeping effects" (p. 362). The book includes as an appendix a useful provision-by-provision PRWORA summary.

REFLECTION

There are several reasons why *Work over Welfare* should be required reading. The first is simply that we will never get a better description of the congressional side of

the battle. Second, this “inside story” provides an informative adult version of “How a Bill Becomes Law, complete with bill development, bill drafting, bill introduction, hearings, committee markups, floor action, repeating each of these steps in the house of Congress that did not initiate the bill, conference committee to eliminate all differences between the bills passed by the two houses, final passage of identical bills by both houses of Congress, and presidential approval” (pp. 20–21). Third, the book reminds us of the central role of congressional staff in legislative affairs, and while Haskins’ position was clearly exceptional, the book provides a good sense of just how much work staff do, the diverse skills required, and the long hours that come with the job—MPP degree jobseekers beware!

Finally, the story offers a dose of humility for anyone trying to connect research to policy. There is not a single instance in the entire book in which research clearly contributes to a choice made in structuring some feature of the legislation. Research, when it appears, serves yet again simply as salve for conscience or ammunition for the debate, never as foundation for reform design. The problem involves, of course, both demand and supply. On the demand side, “much of the Republican welfare reform policy was based on values” (p. 296), not research. Even had demand existed, pertinent and credible research would have been hard to find.

Now the caution. Haskins is an engaging narrator, but readers should not let the author set the terms of the debate. What should the point of reference be in evaluating the outcome of the struggle for reform? Haskins wants it to be increased labor force participation by women, diminished welfare use, and no increase in the incidence of poverty among children. Others may choose to look at the reform from different perspectives. One perspective would be to consider TANF as an institution. Suppose for the sake of argument that the nation needs a support system of last resort. Suppose as well that the public wants that support system to be work-oriented but adequate to meet basic needs and responsive to distress. In other words, suppose that people in our country occasionally get into serious trouble and that it is a function of government to help them out, recognizing that in order to encourage responsible behavior, assistance must be balanced with obligation. Has the system established by PRWORA improved or even sustained the help, compared to what was available under AFDC? Have states successfully linked work and benefits so that the system established by PRWORA has earned enhanced political legitimacy and support? If so, why have states let the basic payment available to TANF recipients fall by an average of 10 percent since 1996 (my calculation), despite a halving of the caseload?

Haskins’ view of reform is static, focused on what he describes as the “revolution” accomplished with PRWORA. Did the institutional changes brought about by PRWORA create a system that, over time, has gotten better? What happened to the performance innovations introduced by the new law—for example, the systems established for rewarding “high performance” and “illegitimacy reduction”? Why have both been dropped? Congress created a “sunset” for TANF by providing funding only through 2002. Would not landmark legislation producing “sweeping reforms” be expected to establish mechanisms for review and adjustment? If so, why did reauthorization take so long, and produce so little? Why can we not be sure that the absence of an increase in the number of families receiving assistance during the recession of 2001–2002 is not the consequence of greater barriers to entry, a possibility Haskins acknowledges only in one footnote out of 748 (p. 419)? Might not the contraction in benefits and access simply reflect the post-PRWORA environment in which every dollar in benefit payments saved can be used, thanks to generous interpretation of “maintenance of effort,” for a wide range of other outlays

with more significant political constituencies? One consequence of the system PRWORA wrought is that we know far less about the assistance systems states deliver on the ground today than we did for AFDC. Yet there is reason to worry, as Jason DeParle's (2004) case study of the highly touted Wisconsin welfare reforms indicates.

If there is a missing piece of the PRWORA story, it is that we lack an insightful and comparative review of the politics and substance of reform at the state level. Reports of state accomplishments did much to soften Washington resistance to the devolution of responsibility for welfare proposed by the Republicans. Bruce Reed cited evidence "that states had lots of ideas as well as the administrative capacity to implement good programs" in his effort to convince Clinton to sign the bill (p. 328). In the end, we need analysis. What good ideas have been identified, implemented, and shared since 1996? Are the 51 state welfare laboratories really at work? After 10 years, isn't this really the question?

MICHAEL WISEMAN is Research Professor of Public Policy, Public Administration, and Economics, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

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