

Those two facts ought to sound an alarm in a nation already bearing monumental health-care costs, write Schneider and Guralnik, researchers at the University of Southern California and the National Institute on Aging, respectively. These costs grew nearly twice as fast as inflation between 1976 and 1987, reaching \$500 billion, or 11 percent of the gross national product.

Much of the increase is the result of the "aging of the aged": The over-85 age group is already the fastest-growing segment of the population. The U.S. Census Bureau's highest (but most credible) estimate is that the over-85 group will grow from 3 million today to 8.6 million by the year 2020 and to 17.8 million by 2040. By then, there will be more than a million Americans aged 100 or older.

Simple demographic projections show with stark clarity what may be in store for the United States. In 1985, for example, the budget for Medicare (federal health insurance for the aged) was \$72 billion. But Medicare outlays increase "substantially" with age, from \$2,017 annually for those aged 65 to 74 to \$3,215 for those aged 85 and above. By 2040, therefore, Medicare could rise to between \$147 and \$212 billion, depending on the demographic assumptions used.

That provides only a partial snapshot of

the future, since Washington picks up only part of the tab for the care of the elderly. For example, it pays only 40 percent of the cost of nursing-home care. In 1986, 1.8 million people over age 65 were living in nursing homes, at a total cost of \$31 billion. (Those over 85 accounted for 45 percent of the nursing-home patients but more than half the costs.) By 2040, the number of elderly nursing-home patients could grow to between 3.6 and 5.9 million, more than half of them over 85. The bill: \$84 to \$189 billion.

Many remedies have been proposed for the rising costs. Some specialists favor cost-containment measures; others, such as former Governor Richard Lamm of Colorado, have even proposed limiting medical care to the relief of suffering after an individual has lived out a "natural" life span of perhaps 80 years. But Schneider and Guralnik argue that medical research, which has done so much to lengthen lives, can now be redirected to improve their quality. Today, for every dollar spent on the care of victims of Alzheimer's disease, less than a penny is spent on research into its causes. By attacking Alzheimer's and other debilitating maladies of the elderly, such as arthritis and Parkinson's disease; we could reduce future health-care costs and make many lives already sure to be longer happier as well.

The Charmed Life Of Head Start

"Head Start Enters Adulthood" by Constance Hold, in *Science* (March 23, 1990), 1333 H St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

It may be one of the great success stories of modern American politics: A liberal social program launched 25 years ago as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society gains such popularity that a conservative Republican, President George Bush, asks Congress to increase its \$1.4 billion budget by 28 percent. And to top it all off, writes Hold, a *Science* reporter, there is hardly a shred of proof that Head Start does what most people think it does.

The original idea behind Head Start was that a brief intervention very early in the

lives of poor children could raise their IQs and "inoculate" them against the depredations of their environment. But that hope began to crumble as early as 1969, when a study showed that children's preschool gains evaporated by the time they reached the third or fourth grade—a finding since confirmed by other studies.

Today, Head Start's advocates maintain that the program serves as a bridge to the world of the school, giving poor children a valuable introduction to middle-class culture: "Many have never seen a book, give

one-word answers to questions, and have limited vocabularies." Other advocates claim that Head Start children gain motivation and self-esteem that carries through their school years. The first claim is backed by most social-science researchers, Hold reports; evidence for the second comes chiefly from a dubious 1984 study.

Much of the confusion over Head Start's effects stems from bad research; "early-intervention" studies are relatively new and are highly politicized. Hold says that researchers are finally beginning to overcome some of these handicaps. Some are even beginning to wonder whether early

intervention itself is vital. In the future, she says, the top priority will be to figure out what causes the "fadeout" that erases the gains of Head Start graduates.

In the meantime, however, there are plenty of reasons why unlikely people like George Bush support Head Start. It provides health care for poor children; it also puts some of their parents to work and gets them involved in their children's education. And more than most federal social programs, Head Start is run by poor people themselves. These are no small virtues; they are also a far cry from the utopian hopes of the Great Society.

Two Black Elites

"Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880" by Loren Schwening, in *The American Historical Review* (Feb. 1990), 400 A St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.

Hard as it may be to believe, the South before the Civil War was home to more than a few well-to-do free blacks. In fact, writes Schwening, a historian at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, the antebellum South gave rise to two fairly distinct black elites.

To compound the irony, the wealthiest blacks lived in the Deep South. There, especially in southern Louisiana, where French and Spanish customs prevailed, a number of white men left substantial inheritances to the black women who had been their sexual partners or to their mulatto children, creating several hundred landowning black families by the early 19th century.

In many respects, these prosperous blacks were not very different from their white neighbors. One out of four free black families owned slaves, Schwening reports, and the freedmen were not known as especially humane masters. Whites did not feel threatened by the black elite. In 1822, Edwin C. Holland, a leading South Carolina editor, wrote: "So far as we are acquainted with their temper and disposition of their feelings [they] abhor the idea of association with blacks in any enterprise that may have for its object the revolution of their condition." Indeed,

prosperous blacks held themselves aloof from their less fortunate counterparts, Schwening adds, forming "small, tightly knit social and cultural clans, linking their families through intermarriage."

The story was much different in Virginia, Kentucky, and the other states of the Upper South, where four out five of the South's free blacks lived. Few were planters. Only one family in 14 owned slaves. Fewer black families prospered: One out of 73 families had accumulated real estate worth \$2,000 or more by 1860 compared to one out of 10 in the Deep South. Women, who constituted more than a third of the black aristocracy in the Deep South, were a much smaller part of the Upper South elite. Finally, free blacks in the Upper South were neither clannish nor acceptable to whites, who scorned them as "indolent" and "depraved."

Apparently, these qualities served them well, because during the decade before the Civil War the wealth of well-to-do blacks in the Upper South began to increase faster than that of their Deep South counterparts. Their numbers tripled, from 213 to 619, their average real-estate holdings grew to \$4,099, and a few truly wealthy free blacks emerged in the cities, such as Baltimore caterer Henry Jakes, North Carolina mer-