Disabled or Dysfunctional?

"Welfare's Next Vietnam" by Heather Mac Donald, in *City Journal* (Winter 1995), Manhattan Institute, 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

In the debate about welfare reform, the "welfare" under scrutiny is the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which assists single mothers and their offspring. Reformers need to expand their horizons, argues Mac Donald, a contributing editor of *City Journal*. They should take a look at the federal government's mushrooming welfare for the disabled, a category that now includes drug addicts, alcoholics, and even children with behavioral problems.

The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program for the nonworking, disabled poor is "the nation's fastest-growing welfare program, about to surpass both AFDC and food stamps as the main form of support for the non-working poor," Mac Donald points out. Begun in 1974, SSI in 1993 dispensed $20 billion in benefits to 4.5 million recipients. Meanwhile, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), launched in 1956 as a modest program to aid workers over 50 with severe disabilities, in 1993 provided 3.7 million "disabled" workers (of all ages) with $35 billion in payments. The eruption of SSDI outlays is bankrupting the Social Security disability trust fund, which will have to be bailed out this year with money from the Social Security retirement fund.

Behind the explosive growth in these two programs, Mac Donald says, is a radical expansion of the concept of disability. Behavior that might simply be considered antisocial or even criminal is now taken as evidence of disabling "mental disorders." Thirty percent of all SSI recipients—and nearly 45 percent of male SSI recipients in their thirties and forties—are classified as mentally impaired; the situation is much the same with SSDI recipients. Increasingly, Mac Donald says, the disability programs are sup-

The Other America?

The Census Bureau recently reported that there are 39.3 million poor people in the United States. Writing in the *American Enterprise* (Jan.–Feb. 1995), Robert Rector, an analyst at the Heritage Foundation, isn't so sure that is an accurate description.

To the typical citizen, saying someone is "poor" implies he lacks a decent place to live, is short on food or clothing, or perhaps that he needs a car to get to work and doesn't have one. By this common sense standard, very few of the 39 million "poor persons" identified by the Census Bureau are, in fact, poor.

We can learn a lot about the Census poverty report by comparing it [with] other government reports that meticulously monitor the actual physical conditions of so-called poor Americans. These reports show that:

- *In 1991 nearly 40 percent of all "poor" households owned their own homes.*
- *Nearly 60 percent of poor households have more than two rooms per person. Nearly 60 percent have air conditioning.*
- *Sixty-four percent of "poor" households own a car; 14 percent own two or more cars.*
- *Fifty-six percent own microwave ovens. Around a quarter have an automatic dishwasher; nearly one-third own a separate, stand-alone freezer.*
- *Ninety-one percent have a color television; 29 percent own two or more.*
- *"Poor" Americans live in larger homes, eat more meat, and are more likely to own cars and dishwashers than the general population in western Europe. A typical "poor" American has twice as much living space as the average Japanese and four times as much as the average Russian.*

porting people who "may indeed be unemployable, but their unemployability reflects rampant drug use, a chaotic upbringing, and a lack of education and work ethic rather than any physical impediment." Today, at least 250,000 diagnosed drug addicts and alcoholics are on the disability rolls, up from fewer than 100,000 five years ago. They are receiving about $1.4 billion a year in benefits.

In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration sought to rein in the disability programs. But instead of closely examining individual cases, it took "a meat-ax approach," reviewing 1.2 million cases and terminating the benefits of nearly a half-million recipients. The courts revolted. "The legacy of the 1980–84 review crisis," Mac Donald writes, "is enormous, for in the legal counterattack the reviews ignited, advocates challenged and enlarged the . . . eligibility standards. Ultimately, Congress codified virtually all of these victories" in the Social Security Disability Reform Act of 1984. It is time, she concludes, to reverse course and adopt a more sensible definition of disability.

The Sins Of the Fathers

"Feminist Theory's Wrong Turn" by John M. Ellis, in *Academic Questions* (Fall 1994), 575 Ewing St., Princeton, N.J. 08540.

Is the past a history of women's mistreatment by men, of "patriarchy" and sexist oppression? It is often presented that way by radical feminists. This is a profound misreading of the past, warns Ellis, a professor of German literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. It threatens to turn the feminist movement, once associated with goals that enjoyed broad support, into an ever more isolated fringe group.

If women in the past were oppressed by a patriarchal conspiracy, he asks, why did they not rise up against it? To be consistent, feminists must take "a dim view of their sisters of yesterday." In reality, he contends, change is coming today for women, "not because they have at last awakened to the enormity of the plot against them, but because the conditions of human life have changed." And this has allowed growing numbers of women to enter the labor force and to compete with men on an equal basis.

Although radical feminists just don't seem to get it, the conditions of life in the premodern era simply did not permit such things, Ellis argues. The absence of modern birth control methods is one important difference, but not the only one. The absence of Social Security meant that children were a virtual economic necessity: *they* were "social security" for people in old age. The high rate of infant mortality meant that in order to have two children who would live to adulthood, a woman would have to bear perhaps six or seven. The shorter life expectancy during the 19th century meant that a woman had a much shorter span of years during which to give birth seven times. The absence of refrigeration meant that most women had to breast-feed their children. The absence of motor vehicles and telephones made it hard for women with young children to work even five miles away from home.

"There are countless other features of modern life that affect the way women are now able to live their lives," Ellis observes, "and they go well beyond the obvious labor-saving devices that enable both men and women to devote a larger share of their time to doing what they like to do." Thanks to electricity, for example, "very few jobs are left in which the greater upper-body strength of men still matters." Profound advances in science and technology, medicine, communications, travel, and social legislation now, for the first time, are equalizing the opportunities available to women and men.

"If misrule by an oppressive 'patriarchy' were a correct interpretation of the past, the logical remedy" would be hiring goals and timetables for reaching parity in all professions and occupations, Ellis points out. But if women instead "see their situation of today as one that has coalesced gradually over the last century and could never have existed earlier, they will simply move to take advantage of their new opportunities." And they will make