

“Public stereotyping of the deaf is no less discriminatory,” adds Reeve, whose wife, Laura Stevenson, a novelist-professor, is deaf. He says, “I’ve learned that while people will go out of their way to help a person in a wheelchair, they assume that someone they can’t talk to is stupid, perhaps retarded, definitely to be avoided.” Reeve was incredulous at first when his wife told him how she was treated. But after frequently “witnessing people coldly leaving her out of the conversation—even at the faculty lunch tables in her

own college—I admit it’s true.” Moreover, he says, “people who talk to me when I meet them by myself cut me out, too, when she and I are together.”

“Everything in American media encourages people” to respond to the disabled by stereotyping them, writes Reeve. “The difference between admiring a deaf professor’s ‘courage’ or a Superman’s ‘good fight’ and developing flexible, compassionate understanding of L. Stevenson or of C. Reeve is *thought*.”

The Other Welfare Reform

“A Liberal in Wolf’s Clothing: Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan in the Light of 1990s Welfare Reform” by Alex Waddan, in *Journal of American Studies* (Aug. 1998), Cambridge Univ. Press, Journals Dept., 40 W. 20th St., New York, N.Y. 10011-4211.

Liberals still distressed by President Bill Clinton’s 1996 action ending “welfare as we know it” ought to turn their minds back to 1969, when they (or their predecessors) succeeded in defeating President Richard Nixon’s plan to overhaul welfare. That was when liberals muffed their big chance, argues Waddan, who teaches at the University of Sunderland, in England.

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—which, though Clinton signed it, was largely the work of congressional Republicans—turned welfare into a program of fixed block grants, gave states much discretion over how they spend the money, imposed a tough work requirement, and set a time limit of five years on any individual’s receipt of welfare.

Consider now President Nixon’s 1969 proposal. Called the Family Assistance Plan, it offered a national guarantee of an income of \$1,600 (about \$6,800 in 1996 dollars) for a family of four with the qualification that the head of the household was making a genuine effort to find or hold down a job. The welfare plan would also function as a wage supplement for the working poor, enabling such families to continue receiving benefits, on a diminishing scale, up to a total household income of \$3,920.

Nixon wrapped his plan in conservative rhetoric, particularly stressing work as an antidote to poverty. Many liberals, observes Waddan, took the president at his public word, or pretended to do so. Former vice president Hubert Humphrey dismissed Nixon’s plan as “nothing new, nothing star-

ting.” Liberals railed against the plan’s supposedly inadequate base income—\$1,600 for a family of four was well below the poverty line—and supposedly punitive work requirement. They failed to see, Waddan argues, that an income program integrating the working poor with single “welfare mothers” who did not work would be less vulnerable to criticism than the existing welfare system serving chiefly the latter group. Perhaps blinded by antipathy toward Nixon, liberals refused to grasp the possibility that once the new program was established, benefits could subsequently be expanded.

Many liberals, Waddan says, apparently made little effort to understand Nixon’s plan. George Wiley, executive director of the National Welfare Rights Organization, for instance, charged that it “discriminates against black people.” But black welfare recipients in eight southern states would have seen their benefits increase, and the other states were supposed to make up any decrease in benefits.

Nixon’s plan passed the House of Representatives but then died in the Senate Finance Committee, where liberals such as Eugene McCarthy and Fred Harris joined conservatives in the kill.

Conservative critics claimed that a guaranteed minimum income would be a disincentive to work. The American Conservative Union complained that Nixon had proposed “a far more liberal welfare program than any Democrat ever dared.” Thirty years later, that historical generalization now has the ring of prophecy.