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**POLITICS & GOVERNMENT**


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### *Food Stamps: Not a Bargain*

“The Case Against In-Kind Transfers: The Food Stamp Program” by Judith A. Barmack, in *Policy Analysis* (Fall 1977), University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif. 94720.

Basic changes in the American welfare system over the past decade have led some analysts to conclude that widespread, de facto welfare reform is underway. The food stamp program and Medicaid, for example, which provide help “in kind” rather than in cash, have delivered more benefits to more people than ever before. (In-kind expenditures now greatly exceed cash outlays in the federal welfare budget.) But if “reform” also means a more equitable and efficient system, then “in-kind transfers” have not advanced the cause and may have retarded it.

The \$5-billion-a-year food stamp program is unfair and wasteful, contends Barmack, an urban affairs specialist at Portland State University. Its complex rules and varying levels of aid have produced unintended anomalies. Households on public assistance are automatically eligible for food stamps; equally needy families who are not on welfare may not be. Regulations governing food stamp benefits tend to provide eligible, higher-income households with disproportionately large allotments, while many poorer families receive few or no benefits.

The program exacts high costs (the result of error, fraud, and labor expenses) from government agencies and private businesses serving intermediate functions, such as selling food and processing the used stamps. Food stamps have also proved incapable of increasing food consumption among the poor.

Although a well-intentioned response, Barmack concludes, the food stamp program may hamper real welfare reform by the political and bureaucratic inertia it encourages.

### *Individuals and the State*

“A Question of Elbow Room” by John Dos Passos, in *The St. Croix Review* (Dec. 1977), P.O. Box 244, Stillwater, Minn. 55082.

Few founding fathers felt that an experiment in full-fledged democracy would work. Washington, John Adams, and the Federalists, for example, believed that universal suffrage would probably end in demagoguery and despotism. Yet all these men considered the self-interest and political apathy of the average citizen and sought to grant him enough “elbow room” to pursue the goals and pleasures of his life. A politics—which Gouverneur Morris called the “sublime Science”—based on happiness and personal freedom was the *raison d'être* of the American state.

What distinguished 18th- and early 19th-century Americans from their successors and their European contemporaries, according to the late novelist John Dos Passos in this reprint from his *Essays on In-*