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THE POLITICS OF INJUSTICE  
RHETORIC AND POVERTY IN REAGAN'S AMERICA

by

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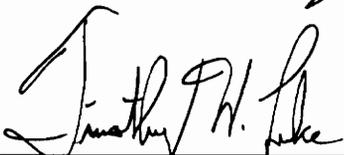


Richard D. Shingles, Chairman



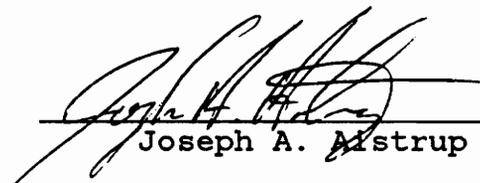
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(ABSTRACT)

During the Reagan years the poverty rate in America rose dramatically. Simultaneously, the rich got richer at the expense of the working and middle classes. Despite this trend towards greater economic inequality, the public expressed its sympathy for the Reagan administration and the conservative political agenda in a variety of ways. The question therefore arises: Why was there no widespread public resistance against Reagan's policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich? Three key themes of the American political culture, viz. equality defined in terms of equality before the law, materialistic individualism and racism attribute wealth and poverty to innate personal characteristics rather than to structural causes. Reagan's rhetoric successfully reinvigorated these themes, defining poverty in terms of individual ineptitude and portraying the poor as undeserving. Thus, the Reagan administration's policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich could be enacted without facing broad resistance, in most cases even with support, from the American people.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE POOR AND THE LEGITIMACY OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

"This is a television nation. Maybe it's time for a mini-series about the second American Civil War. This time it would not be North versus South. This time it would be the haves versus the have-nots: Harlem against the Yupper East Side, Beverly Hills against Compton, the suburbs against the inner cities, the displaced against the entrenched. This time it would not be neat and territorial. This time it would be guerilla war, in neighborhoods, in cities, with block against block until people walked across the gulf and discovered the unique idea of sharing."<sup>1</sup>

This remark made in 1987 by Benjamin J. Stein, former White House aide, reveals the potential dimensions of the problem of poverty in the United States. During the 1980s the American poor got poorer and the rich got richer. Many authors, even neoconservatives worry about this massive redistribution of wealth.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to understand the reasons why there was such a massive shift of wealth from the poor to the rich. A good part of the explanation lies in the social and economic policies of the Reagan administration.<sup>3</sup> There are multiple indicators of how these policies actually favored the haves at the expense of the have-nots. For instance, the real disposable income for the poorest ten percent of Americans

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<sup>1</sup> Stein in Phillips 1990, p.155

<sup>2</sup> Phillips 1990

<sup>3</sup> Harrington 1984 and Schwarz 1988

declined by almost fifteen percent between 1977 and 1988, while the richest ten percent had their real disposable incomes raised by over sixteen percent during the same period of time.<sup>4</sup> Also, welfare was cut while deregulation and speculation made a few rich on the backs of the federal finances and the rest of society.

One might have anticipated such policies to have produced a crisis of confidence or even a crisis of legitimacy in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> However, public dissent was generally muted; far removed from the crisis of legitimacy which took place in the Sixties. The American public even highly approved of Reagan's handling of his job as president. The question therefore arises: Why was there no widespread public resistance against Reagan's policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich? Answering this question is the purpose of this paper. Specifically, I will address Reagan's success in redistributing wealth from the poor to the rich as a function of his mastery of rhetoric and the susceptibility of many Americans to his message.

This paper consists of three parts. Part One describes poverty in the United States from the 1960s until today. Its primary purpose is to portray to the reader the extent of American poverty and what has, and has not been done to

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<sup>4</sup> Phillips 1990, p.17

<sup>5</sup> Phillips 1990

fight it. In Part Two I will demonstrate that the key themes of Reagan's rhetoric lie deep in the American political culture. The nature and role of political myths will be examined as a precondition for the understanding of the real content and the significance of Reagan's rhetoric. Part Three analyzes Reagan's rhetoric and the public's reaction to it.

Parts Two and Three taken together should lay open how rhetorically created myths and their public acceptance sanctioned the redistribution of wealth. Reagan portrayed the existing welfare net as wasteful, overexpanded and unnecessary, and the poor as undeserving. The public by and large bought into this view because the American political culture has always regarded poverty as individual failure and property as a sign of individual merit. Americans also have long accepted the view of Reagan and the Republican Party that what is good for business, is generally good for America. The administration's rhetoric simply reinforced existing negative sentiments against the poor. This communicative process between a gifted speaker and a receptive audience helps account for the ease with which the Reagan administration pushed through welfare cuts while simultaneously benefiting the already well-to-do. The remainder of the introduction describes how I shall develop this thesis.

Part One addresses the extent of poverty in the United

States from 1960 until today, focusing on the period of the Great Society legislation and its implementation. This period is interesting on two accounts. First, Reagan claims that the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society failed. Second, he claimed in 1980 that poverty was not a significant problem in America. I will describe trends in the overall poverty rate as well as the race and gender bias of poverty. Major anti-poverty programs, such as Aid for Families with Dependent Children, Medicaid and Medicare, and Food Stamps, will be briefly described. These programs will not be analyzed in depth. My purpose is to provide a general understanding of governmental efforts to fight poverty prior to Reagan's successful bid for the presidency. I will describe the major welfare cuts of the Reagan administration to show how it reversed the trend from an expanding welfare state to one that leaves increasing numbers of the poor, particularly the working poor, without public support.

Part Two offers the key to understanding the interaction that took place between Reagan and the public. It is divided in two chapters: (1) the cultural roots of Reagan's vision and (2) a discussion of the importance of myths and symbols for American social and economic policies.

In order to understand Reagan's message, I will discuss three basic themes in American political culture that have a bearing on the predicament of the poor: A narrow legal conception of egalitarianism, individualistic materialism

and racism. These themes have dominated American political discourse for over two centuries molding the public's perception of the poor as 'undeserving' and morally, mentally or biologically inferior to the rest of society. Poverty is seen as individual failure and public assistance for the poor is rejected as inappropriate and ineffective.

The next step is to elucidate why large parts of the public buy into myths about the poor. Murray Edelman helps us to understand the bond between the American people and their president in his portrayal of American politics as symbolic action. Edelman points out that political myths are widely accepted because they offer simple, consistent and 'reliable' explanations of social phenomena. For instance, one can see the poor and unemployed hanging out in the streets but the social and economic structures that make these people hang out in the streets are not immediately apparent. Thus, the conclusion that the poor do not want to work suggests itself.

The politically and economically powerful reinforce political myths about the poor through their control over mass communication. These myths generate tensions within the working class, between the unemployed poor and the working poor, between races and between the sexes, thereby veiling the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

Part Three of this thesis examines Reagan's rhetoric against the poor and the public's reaction to it. For the

analysis of Reagan's rhetoric I will rely primarily on Reagan's Inaugural Addresses, the State of the Union Addresses, the Economic Reports, as well as his Budget Messages as indicators of his depiction of the welfare state and the poor. These speeches were broadcasted on all major TV stations and reprinted in most national newspapers. Thus, they reached the overwhelming majority of Americans. Additionally, these speeches are relatively rare but important national events which gives them a significant impact on political discourse. Major attention will be paid to Reagan's categorization of the poor into 'deserving' and 'undeserving.' This categorization is crucial to evoke support for welfare cuts because it allowed him to propose cuts, while suggesting that the interests of the deserving poor and the truly needy are protected. Reagan used other rhetorical themes, such as the 'punitive' tax system, the 'excessive growth of government,' and the budget deficit, to portray welfare spending and the poor as onerous for the American society.

Reagan's rhetoric divided the poor, putting the non-working poor in an apparently adversarial position to the working poor, the latter of whom he portrayed as part of a broad, nebulous middle class. The working population was portrayed as the victims of a welfare system which benefits the non-working poor at the expense of everyone else. This rhetorical attack on the non-working poor, can be regarded

as part of a broader neoconservative strategy to delegitimize the welfare state. It was also a cynical deception because the working poor suffered most from Reagan's welfare cuts.

The last chapter shows how the majority of the American public quiescently accepted Reagan's agenda. Reagan's reelection in 1984 and Bush's victory over Dukakis are, amongst others, indicators that the American public accepted the welfare myths revived and reinforced by the Republican administrations. Public opinion polls reveal that negative attitudes towards the poor were very common even before Reagan took office. In short, in the competition for the hearts and minds of the American people, Reagan had the easier task of reinforcing traditional views of the poor. His Democratic competitors had the much more complicated and unpopular task of making a case for the structural causes of poverty. The simplicity of Reagan's argument and the fact that it coincided with the mainstream American political culture helps explain his success.

## PART ONE

### POVERTY IN AMERICA

The central topic of this study is Reagan's rhetoric about poverty and its success in molding the public's perception of anti-poverty programs. In order to understand and evaluate the veracity of Reagan's rhetoric it is necessary to describe the nature and extent of poverty in America prior to and during Reagan's presidency.

Chapter One describes poverty rates from the early 1960s through the late 1970s and briefly assesses major anti-poverty programs, such as Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Medicaid and Medicare, and Food Stamps. My purpose is to demonstrate that federal and state programs made significant progress in fighting poverty in the period preceding the Reagan presidency. Leading authorities in the field of social policy, such as the Washington based Urban Institute, hold that the anti-poverty programs of the Sixties and Seventies were crucial in cutting the poverty rate in half between 1959 and 1978. I will review the findings of major studies conducted by government agencies, universities and independent research institutions to portray an alternative counterreality to Reagan's claims that the 'War on Poverty' was a complete failure and that his administration in fact improved the situation of the poor. In this sense, Part One counters Reagan's myths with facts (see Chapter Five for Reagan's myths about the poor

and the welfare state).

Chapter Two will address the decline of the welfare state during Reagan's presidency. While Reagan was in office, spending for many anti-poverty programs was reduced or eliminated altogether, contributing to a rise in the poverty rate. The implicit race and gender bias of cuts in anti-poverty programs will also be considered. Not only did the poor get poorer during the Reagan years, but the rich got richer at the expense of the poor. A description of the reverse redistribution of wealth will reveal the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of upper-class Americans during the 1980s.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE EDUCATION OF RONALD REAGAN AND OTHER CONSERVATIVES

If we are to accept his remarks on the issue as candid, Ronald Reagan failed to understand the nature of poverty in America. He failed to comprehend its structural causes and effects. He would not admit that the causes of poverty are other than individual incompetence or unwillingness to work and he did not appreciate the extent of the damage of poverty for millions of Americans and society generally. This chapter is about the lesson Reagan failed to learn.

Reagan condemned public assistance for the poor with folksy anecdotes such as the following: "A guy comes out of his front door to go to work and sees the guy across the street just sitting there drawing welfare ... All he knows is that he shouldn't have to pay for that guy's permanent vacation."<sup>1</sup> Oversimplistic and slanted stereotypes dominate his rhetoric. The reality is quite different. This chapter describes that complex reality.

#### 1.1. The Anti-Poverty Programs of the Great Society

Poverty, was a top domestic policy issue in the United States during the Sixties and early Seventies. According to the Federal Government definition of poverty almost forty million people or 22.4 percent of all Americans lived in

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan 1976, p.95

poverty in 1959 prior to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and the War on Poverty<sup>2</sup>. Poverty had a clear racial and sexual overtone. Over fifty-five percent of all African-Americans and over fifty percent of all individuals in female headed households were classified as poor at this time<sup>3</sup>.

The poor did not profit from the enormous economic expansion during the Fifties. Michael Harrington focused the public's attention on poverty in his 1962 work, The Other America. He described those for whom the American Dream is but a myth and the extreme difficulty of getting out of

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<sup>2</sup> The measurement of poverty: The Federal Government began to measure the extent of poverty in America in the early Sixties. Studies based on survey data found that the average American family spends about one third of their expenditures on food. Accordingly, the poverty line was established at three times the amount necessary to buy a nutritionally adequate low cost diet. Today's baseline for the calculation of the poverty line is the so-called Thrifty Food Plan. It is also multiplied by three and adjusted annually by the change of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The poverty threshold for a family of four was \$10,178 in 1983 (Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, pp.ix/x).

The official definition of poverty is very controversial. It does not consider regional differences in the costs of living; also the measurement of poverty solely based on cash income is problematic. Neoconservatives argue that in-kind transfers such as Food Stamps or Medicaid should be counted as indirect cash transfers. Also, the near-poor are neglected since one dollar difference defines a person as either poor or non-poor. In 1983, the official poverty rate was 15.2%. Rivaling techniques of measurement found the poverty rate to be anywhere between 10.5% and 16.4% in the same year (Joe and Rogers 1985, p.5). There are others who hold that poverty can not be measured by using material indicators since they regard poverty as a state of mind (unfulfilled expectations) rather than a material condition.

<sup>3</sup> Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, p.46, Table 1

poverty:

"Here is one of the most familiar forms of the vicious circle of poverty. The poor get sick more than anyone else in the society. That is because they live in the slums, jammed together under unhygienic conditions; they have inadequate diets, and cannot get decent medical care. When they become sick, they are sick longer than any other group in the society. Because they are sick more often and longer than anyone else, they lose wages and work, and find it difficult to hold a steady job. And because of this, they cannot pay for good housing, for a nutritious diet, for doctors. At any given point in the circle, particularly when there is a major illness, their prospect is to move to an even lower level and to begin the cycle round and round, toward even more suffering."<sup>4</sup>

It is claimed that John F. Kennedy read and was swayed by Harrington's book. This and a visual exposure to poverty in West Virginia finally led president Kennedy to enact anti-poverty programs which ultimately culminated in a major federal effort to fight poverty during the Johnson administration. Then governmental initiatives occurred largely in reaction to the Civil Rights Movement and the growing liberal electoral coalition composed of northern Democrats, newly enfranchised minorities, intellectuals and other liberals.

The Johnson administration and the Democratic controlled Congress attacked poverty and discrimination on a broad front, passing the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1967, and extensive welfare legislation including the

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<sup>4</sup> Harrington 1962, p.15

Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Food Stamp Act of 1964, and amendments to the Social Security Act (e.g. Medicaid and Medicare in 1965). All of this was part of a 'War on Poverty' declared by Johnson in 1964: "This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America."<sup>5</sup>

As early as 1966, only three years after the War on Poverty was initiated, significant progress had been made: The poverty rate was down to 14.7% from 22.4% in 1959. Yet, poverty remained a serious problem. A poverty rate of 14.7% meant over twenty-eight million people living on the edge. 41.8% of all African Americans still lived in poverty at this time, despite all the Civil Rights and welfare legislation. Children, the elderly, and single mothers, which are hard to label 'undeserving' then as now, were disproportionately poor. In short, the War on Poverty had limited, but significant success. The strengths and weakness of the Federal Government's effort to reduce poverty can be illustrated by a short characterization of the most significant anti-poverty programs of the 1960s and 1970s: Aid for Families with Dependent Children, Medicaid and Medicare, and Food Stamps. With the exception of Medicare (which assists the elderly and is protected by a strong middle-class constituency) these programs were principal

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson in DiNitto and Dye 1987, p.188

targets of Reagan's budget axe in the 1980s.

#### Aid for Families with Dependent Children

On February 1, 1962, the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program was transformed into the Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. The primary goals were to assist single-headed (predominantly fatherless) families with under-age children in paying for basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. Such a strategy, it was assumed, would help eradicate poverty at its roots because it ensured a minimal protection and presumably a better future for the most innocent victims of poverty, the children.

AFDC is a direct cash transfer program which shifts income from the upper and middle classes to those below the poverty line. It is an entitlement program, i.e., everybody who meets the eligibility criteria has a right to claim benefits. Eligibility levels and benefit levels are determined by each state individually. This accounts for an immense diversity with regard to the categories of people who receive benefits and the amount of benefits granted. In 1983, the maximum monthly AFDC benefits for a family of three ranged from ninety-six dollars in the State of Mississippi up to 674 Dollars in the State of Alaska. The median state maximum benefit for a family of three was

\$310.<sup>6</sup> Although direct cash transfers manifestly reduce poverty, by increasing individual income, restrictive eligibility requirements and deficient payments indicate that this program was never intended to eliminate poverty.

In twenty-five states the amount of money AFDC recipients got was lower than the state's definition of the minimum amount of money for subsistence. For example, in Alabama benefits were 31% of the state's prescribed need level in 1983. That is to say, the state of Alabama provided a three member AFDC family with \$118 per month, whereas it regarded \$384 as the minimum amount necessary for a family of three to live.<sup>7</sup>

A 1967 amendment to AFDC required recipients above the age of sixteen to participate in work-training programs to remain eligible for benefits. Simultaneously, a work incentive program was enacted which allowed each working AFDC recipient to keep the first thirty dollars earned on the job plus one third of the rest of the income up to the eligibility threshold for their own disposal (generally labeled the 'thirty-plus-one-third-rule'). The idea was that an additional financial incentive to work would encourage AFDC recipients to get off the welfare rolls and become self-sufficient by entering the labor force. It is important

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<sup>6</sup> Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, pp.78n

<sup>7</sup> Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, p.80

to note that the Federal Government built work incentives into the AFDC program prior to the Reagan administration.

### Medicaid and Medicare

Medicaid and Medicare were created by a 1965 amendment to the Social Security Act. Medicaid is a joint federal-state program which grants free medical treatment to AFDC recipients. Bad health is a cause and a consequence of poverty and many poor cannot afford private health insurance. Medical care was considered as a necessary addition to AFDC which covered only basic living expenses.

Medicaid eligibility is closely tied to AFDC eligibility. Twenty-one states do not grant Medicaid to persons who do not receive AFDC. However, in twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia low income non-AFDC recipients can qualify for Medicaid if their health bills exceed certain limits<sup>a</sup>.

Medicare is a health care program for disabled persons and persons aged sixty-five and older. It is paid for by the Federal Government and the beneficiaries. Basically, Medicare is composed of a compulsory Hospital Insurance, which covers most expenses caused by a patient's treatment in a hospital, and a voluntary Supplemental Medical Insurance (SMI) which covers eighty percent of medical costs

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<sup>a</sup> Joe and Rogers 1986, p.28

other than hospitalization, dental care, prescription drugs, and some other services.<sup>9</sup> Hospital Insurance is paid for by payroll taxes collected under the Social Security system. Supplemental Medical Insurance, which was \$15.50 monthly in 1985, is paid by the participants themselves. Because of its broad coverage Medicare (everyone ages and members of all social classes are concerned about the health of their parents) has had consistently strong popular support. Not so for Medicaid.

#### Food Stamps

The Food Stamp program was enacted in 1964 as an additional in-kind provision for the poor. Exclusively funded by the Federal Government it provides AFDC recipients and other low income persons with subsidized coupons for the purchase of food. The number of Food Stamps received is inversely related to a person's earnings and AFDC provision, i.e., the poorer a person is after federal cash transfers the more Food Stamps he or she gets. It should be kept in mind that the Food Stamp program is aimed at all low income households regardless of their primary source of income, be it government cash transfers or earnings from work. The program's primary goal is to provide all members of low income households with a nutritionally adequate low cost

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<sup>9</sup> DiNitto and Dye 1987, pp.214n

diet. It is supervised by the U.S. Department of Agriculture but administered and carried out by state and local welfare agencies. Unlike AFDC, eligibility and spending levels are set at the federal level and uniform throughout the country.

In 1977 the requirement that recipients pay for part of their monthly Food Stamps was lifted. This increased the number of Food Stamp recipients considerably because many of the poorest, who were previously eligible but unable to pay their share of the allotment, began claiming Food Stamps.

#### Other Anti-Poverty Programs

There were other legislative efforts to reduce poverty during the Sixties and Seventies. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 sponsored Community Action Programs which were to be carried out by community based non-profit organizations. The poor were not given direct financial assistance under these programs. Rather, they were provided with beneficial services like job-training, child care, literacy training, legal services etc. Elected representatives of the poor participated with local government representatives and members of non-governmental organizations in planning, administering and carrying out the Community Action Programs.

In 1967 Congress added the Legal Services Program to the Economic Opportunity Act. The intention was to provide free legal counsel to the poor. On their own, the poor often did

not know their rights and they could not afford legal assistance to make proper use of welfare services. The Legal Services program initiated a large increase in caseloads on welfare rolls, often through class action lawsuits. Many poor who were formerly excluded from welfare became eligible because Legal Services forced welfare agencies to ease and standardize access.<sup>10</sup>

The nation's commitment to address the ills of poverty did not end with the transfer of the presidency to the Republicans in 1968. In fact, they were finetuned by the Nixon and Ford administrations. Federal assistance to the poor (measured in terms of expenditures and caseloads) continued to grow throughout the Seventies. In 1973 the Nixon administration proposed the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), the latest of a series of programs aimed at alleviating the problems of the long-term unemployed through federally funded job-training programs. The intention of CETA was to consolidate already existing employment and job-training acts to make them a more effective tool in fighting unemployment.<sup>11</sup>

This section has sought to describe some of the principal programs in a major federal initiative to help families and individual persons in desperate need to meet the basic

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<sup>10</sup> DiNitto and Dye 1987, pp.192n

<sup>11</sup> DiNitto and Rye 1987, p.198

standards of a humane life and to overcome poverty. Help was supposed to be temporary.

### 1.2. Evaluation of the Anti-Poverty Programs

The anti-poverty programs implemented since 1960 and prior to the Reagan presidency varied in nature and in their effectiveness. This section reviews the major successes and failures in the War on Poverty.

#### Positive Effects

Reagan claimed that the Great Society was a "long and sorry tale of disappointment."<sup>12</sup> As a result of public assistance, he holds, "poverty stopped shrinking and actually began to grow worse ... leaving millions of Americans trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency."<sup>13</sup>

This and similar statements made by Reagan are clear oversimplifications and misinterpretations of the impacts of America's major anti-poverty programs on the situation of the poor as this section will reveal. Granted, the programs of the 'War on Poverty' were afflicted with problems and some failed to serve their purpose. However, Reagan ignores the positive impacts of the War on Poverty. The following is a brief reconsideration of the successes of the anti-poverty

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<sup>12</sup> The Los Angeles Times, February 8, 1987

<sup>13</sup> The Arizona Daily Star, February 8, 1987

programs.

Between 1959 and 1979 the poverty rate in the United States was almost cut in half. It declined from 22.4% to 11.7%.<sup>14</sup> This decline was mainly a result of governmental welfare programs, not the growth of the private sector economy. John Schwarz, an authority in the field of domestic policies, holds that the "government's programs made their ... contribution by reaching, and reducing poverty within the economically less-competitive groups of American people."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, "the private sector was itself incapable of making more than a marginal dent in poverty among the millions of Americans who remained trapped within the weaker economic groups." Therefore "the government's programs were vital in fighting poverty."<sup>16</sup> Michael Harrington, a renowned authority and author of the widely read works, The Other America,<sup>17</sup> and The New American Poverty<sup>18</sup> wrote in a reconsideration of the War on Poverty, that though "the antipoverty program turned out to be a skirmish rather than an unconditional war, it nonetheless

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<sup>14</sup> Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, p.46, Table 1

<sup>15</sup> Schwarz 1988, p.36

<sup>16</sup> Schwarz 1988, p.31

<sup>17</sup> Harrington 1962

<sup>18</sup> Harrington 1984

made some significant advances.<sup>19</sup>

Antipoverty programs were particularly advantageous to racial minorities, women and children. Table 1.1 shows the decline in the poverty rate for selected social groups between 1959 and 1978.

Table 1.1  
Poverty Rates for Selected Groups  
between 1959 and 1978 in Percent<sup>20</sup>

	1959	1970	1978	Decline (% points)
All Americans	22.4	12.6	11.7	11.0
Aged Poor	35.2	24.5	14.0	21.2
Children	26.9	14.9	15.7	11.2
Nonaged Adults	--	9.2	8.9	--
Female Headed Households	50.2	38.2	32.3	17.9
Blacks	55.1	33.5	30.6	24.5
Whites	18.1	9.9	8.9	9.4

These numbers indicate that groups which suffered most from poverty experienced a substantial reduction in the poverty rate between 1959 and 1978. For instance, the poverty rate for African-Americans declined by over twenty-four percentage points, poverty in female headed families declined by almost eighteen percentage points, while the overall poverty rate declined only by eleven percentage

<sup>19</sup> Harrington 1984, p.3

<sup>20</sup> Data from Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, p.46, Table 1

points.

In short, an evaluation of the aggregate effects of major anti-poverty programs in the United States in the Sixties and Seventies reveals a complex reality: They were not intended nor were they sufficient to eradicate poverty, but they did make substantial progress in reducing poverty. The poverty rate in America declined significantly in the 1960s and 1970s in large part as a result of public welfare spending.

Most importantly, the anti-poverty programs alleviated the situation of structurally disadvantaged groups, minorities, single mothers and their children and the elderly.

Now follows a more detailed portrayal of the positive effects of the major anti-poverty programs. Despite all its shortcomings, the AFDC program improved the situation of many families living in poverty by making direct cash transfers. As shown in Table 1.1, the main beneficiaries of AFDC, single mothers and their children and large numbers of the working poor experienced a considerable improvement in their economic situation.

Malcolm L. Goggin of the University of Houston points out that despite all the problems and criticism "it is clear that millions of Americans have been helped by the Medicare and the Medicaid programs." As a result "the status of the

nation's health has certainly improved."<sup>21</sup> An earlier study, conducted by Stuart and Bair, found that "Medicare and Medicaid had aggregate redistributive effects; they were both pro-poor programs in a sense of distributing more money to the poor and elderly."<sup>22</sup>

Concerning malnutrition, a member of the 1967 U.S. Senate study group on hunger and poverty in America found ten years later: "There can be little doubt that significant change has occurred since 1967 ... Nowhere did I see the gross evidence of malnutrition among young children that we saw in 1967."<sup>23</sup> DiNitto and Dye argue that despite high costs and malpractice, the Food Stamp program "has come closer to covering all poor persons than any other welfare program."<sup>24</sup> At least in this regard it can be labeled effective.

Legal Services was successful in expanding welfare services. Formerly, public assistance was denied to many legally eligible poor because of bureaucratic red tape and biased decision-making processes in welfare agencies. Lawsuits conducted by Legal Services eased and standardized access.

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<sup>21</sup> Goggin 1984, pp.73n

<sup>22</sup> Stuart and Bair in Goggin 1984, p.72

<sup>23</sup> Subcommittee on Nutrition 1979, p.11

<sup>24</sup> DiNitto and Dye 1987, p.185

The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) served many structurally disadvantaged groups. For instance, forty percent of all CETA supported persons were minorities, thirty-nine percent were twenty-one years old or younger and about seventy-three percent were low-income persons.<sup>25</sup> All in all, three and a half million people were trained under CETA every year. It offered public employment and thereby lowered dependency on other forms of public support. It was an active means to overcome passivity and dependency traditionally associated with the dole.

No matter how much Reagan and like-minded conservatives criticize the efforts of the Great Society, they can not deny the fact that government anti-poverty programs were instrumental in cutting the poverty rate in half between 1959 and 1978.<sup>26</sup>

### 1.3. Problems of the Anti-Poverty Programs

The above discussion has shown the undeniably positive effects of the War on Poverty. However, one has to keep in mind that the War on Poverty was never won, nor was there

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<sup>25</sup> Office of Management and Budget 1981

<sup>26</sup> I do not claim that all reduction in the poverty rate results from federal anti-poverty programs. The booming economy of the Sixties certainly helped in reducing the poverty rate. Additionally, the military draft during the Vietnam War (during which African-Americans were drafted disproportionately) lowered the unemployment rate, thus preventing many from falling below the poverty line.

ever a commitment beyond rhetoric to win it. The effectiveness of the anti-poverty programs was limited. They were under-financed, often poorly managed, and did not reach all those they should have reached.

There are other reasons than the inadequacy of anti-poverty programs to account for the persistence of poverty. The minimum wage in the United States is barely enough for single persons, let alone families, to live above the federal government's poverty line. The continually high unemployment rate makes it easy for employers to keep the real wage level low.<sup>27</sup> Racial minorities and women always faced worse job opportunities and lower pay than Whites or men despite spotty affirmative action programs.<sup>28</sup> Other reasons beyond the immediate control of the U.S. economy, like the oil price shocks of the early Seventies and the resulting recession in 1974 and 1975, also have a clear impact on the poverty rate.

This is all that needs to be said about structural causes of poverty for the moment. My main task is to describe the negative side-effects and the shortcomings of anti-poverty programs, since they served Reagan as justification for reducing or eliminating assistance for the poor. The AFDC program has two major shortcomings: First, there is no

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<sup>27</sup> Harrington 1984, p.34

<sup>28</sup> Schwarz 1988, p.29n

uniform federal payment standard which gives equal benefits to all recipients. Average monthly payments per family in 1986 ranged from \$114 in Alabama to \$565 in Alaska.<sup>29</sup> In many states, particularly in the Deep South, the state income need levels are way below the federal poverty line and do not guarantee a minimum standard of living.<sup>30</sup> Second, since AFDC is usually issued to single-headed families only, intact families might not receive provisions or one parent is forced to leave the family. Though federal law permits aid to two parent families, it does not require it. Only one half of the States provides aid to two parent families.

In twenty-one states Medicaid is only available for those who are eligible for AFDC. A number of policy-analysts claim that the close connection between AFDC and Medicaid eventually creates a work-disincentive: The free medical services provided by Medicaid are unaffordable for many working-poor who do not receive AFDC. In order to remain eligible for Medicaid, the argument goes, a number of the poor might hesitate to take low-wage jobs<sup>31</sup>

Medicare does not cover all medical expenditures and the

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<sup>29</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989, p.367, Table 607

<sup>30</sup> For example: As mentioned earlier, Alabama only paid 31% of its official state need level to AFDC recipients in 1983 (Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, p.80).

<sup>31</sup> See for example Joe and Rogers 1986, pp.143n and Schwarz 1988, pp.31n

Supplementary Medical Insurance (SMI), which pays for eighty percent of medical services other than hospitalization, is voluntary. The poorest Medicare recipients cannot pay for SMI. They cannot obtain essential medical help such as visiting a doctor, routine diagnoses, prescription drugs etc. despite living in the wealthiest nation on earth.

Both Medicaid and Medicare have been criticized for being too expensive and subject to waste and fraud. Claims of patient abuse by undeserving or non-poor are common. In contrast to this public image, a study found that provider abuse was substantial whereas "patient abuse was relatively negligible."<sup>32</sup> The incredibly high costs for Medicaid and Medicare also fired public skepticism. Federal expenditures for Medicare (which are in part covered by contributions of the beneficiaries) rose from \$1.1 billion in 1966 to \$44.7 billion in 1981.<sup>33</sup> Medicaid costs rose twenty-fold from \$1.5 billion in 1966 to \$31.3 billion in 1981.<sup>34</sup> It is easy to overlook the fact that escalating government expenditures reflected the spiralling costs of health care in the United States and reduced red tape in helping the truly needy.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Goggin 1984, p.74

<sup>33</sup> Goggin 1984, p.69, Table 1

<sup>34</sup> Goggin 1984, pp.68n, Table 1

<sup>35</sup> The increasing costs for medical services, equipment and medicine accounts to a large degree for the increase in costs for Medicare and Medicaid.

The Food Stamp program was also highly controversial, especially after the 1977 elimination of the purchase requirement. On the one hand the U.S. General Accounting Office claimed in a study that too many benefits are issued and that fraud is not punished.<sup>36</sup> On the other, the monthly Food Stamp allotments were often criticized as too low.

The costs of the Food Stamp program increased from \$32 million in 1965 to \$12 billion in 1983. At this point of time about twenty-two million Americans were fed with Food Stamp subsidies. The immense growth in costs is mainly due to improved eligibility. Both Legal Services and the elimination of the purchase requirement increased the caseload substantially.

The effect of job training programs is hard to evaluate. In contrast to other programs, their impact on the situation of the poor can not be measured directly. It is often argued that they are the least effective of all anti-poverty programs. Several structural limitations constrain the effectiveness of job training. First, job training does not guarantee a job. Even skilled workers have difficulties finding jobs in times of high unemployment. Second, most jobs offered to poor persons, trained and untrained, are minimum wage jobs. The minimum wage (\$3.35 per hour in March 1991) is so low as to create millions of working poor. There

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<sup>36</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office 1977

is no great incentive to take jobs, particularly at the loss of AFDC and Medicaid. Third, racial minorities or women, even if more qualified than Whites or men, face continued discrimination.<sup>37</sup>

The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act offers an example for the limitations of job training programs. Its original purpose, to provide job training for the unskilled long-term unemployed, was overridden by sponsoring public-service jobs to almost any group of the unemployed in an effort to master the high unemployment rates during the recession years of 1974 and 1975. Job-training was still part of CETA but many local governments used CETA supported public employees to replace locally paid public employees in order to reduce local expenditures.

This practice undermined the original intention of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act because in many cases, the most unemployable did not benefit from the program. The unemployed who already had skills were the most likely to be employed in CETA sponsored public jobs.

In short, federal anti-poverty programs were of limited intent and scope. They are afflicted with a number of problems. Most of them are under-financed, have administrative problems, or do not reach all those they should reach. Notwithstanding, they had positive effects on

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<sup>37</sup> Subcommittee on Oversight 1983, p.46, Table 1

the economic situation of many poor in this country. In this sense Reagan's statement that the Great Society was "a long and sorry tale of disappointment" is clearly oversimplified.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REAGANISM: STEALING FROM THE HAVE-NOTS - GIVING TO THE HAVES

This chapter examines the condition of the poor during the Reagan years. First, Reagan's attack on the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society will be described and evaluated. Not only was public assistance for the poor reduced during the Eighties, there was a transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. Describing this shift is the second step. Finally, I will address the racist and sexist undertones of Reaganism.

Though Reagan's attack on the welfare state was undeniably the single most important factor impacting the predicament of the poor, other factors beyond the administration's immediate control had negative effects on the situation of the poor. During the 1983 recession the unemployment rate rose to almost ten percent (from 6.5% in 1980) thus increasing the number of the poor and putting an additional financial burden on the shoulders of the Federal Government. The declined competitiveness of US-products on the world-market in the 1980s and the stock exchange crash in 1987 were other factors troubling the American economy thus worsens the situation of the poor.

#### 2.1. Reagan and the Decline of the Welfare State

In an address to the 1981 National Conference on Social Welfare, Reagan announced that his "administration is

committed to providing continued services for those most in need. By making more efficient use of our available resources, we can improve programs while reducing costs."<sup>1</sup> Contrast this with the grievances of a Georgia mother after having her AFDC payments and Medicaid coverage terminated in October 1981:

"After the rent and bills - and you know those food stamps don't last but three weeks when I stretch - there's nothing left for anything like clothes or even school supplies for the kids. They have to borrow from other kids ... I'll be lucky if I can buy paper and pencils for them once a month."<sup>2</sup>

This section is an evaluation of what Reagan did to the poor in the name of ending waste and fraud, and reducing inefficiency. A 1983 study of the Subcommittee on Oversight of the Committee of Ways and Means of the U.S. House of Representatives found that the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981 resulted in a 9.3% reduction in aggregate AFDC spending. It also caused a 13.7% reduction of AFDC caseloads.<sup>3</sup> The desired savings were achieved not by cutting waste and improving efficiency or by purging the non-working poor from the welfare rolls but by denying many services to the working poor. Ironically, the working poor

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan in National Conference on Social Welfare 1982, p.xv

<sup>2</sup> Joe and Rogers 1986, p.111

<sup>3</sup> Subcommittee on Oversight 1984, p.2

(people who work part time or full time at minimum wage jobs) were considered undeserving.

The AFDC cuts had a significant gender bias since almost 80% of all AFDC families are headed by single women. In New York City, for instance, the poverty rate for female-headed working AFDC families increased from 28 percent before OBRA to 52 percent after OBRA (1983).<sup>4</sup> This means, every second person living in a household headed by a working single woman lived in poverty in New York City.

Several provisions were enacted by the Reagan administration to tighten AFDC eligibility for the working poor. Families with a total income of 150 percent or higher of the need standard (which varies by state and usually is substantially below the federal poverty line) became ineligible. Furthermore, formerly tax deductible expenses like transportation costs as well as child-care expenditures were standardized to a deductible sum of \$75 and \$160 per month, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Stronger still, the Reagan administration decided to limit the 'thirty-plus-one-third-rule' (which allowed working AFDC recipients to keep the first thirty dollars earned plus an additional third of the remaining earnings) to four months after obtaining employment (it had been

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<sup>4</sup> Subcommittee on Oversight 1984, p.4

<sup>5</sup> Joe and Rogers 1985, p.34n

granted for an unlimited period of time before Reagan). After this period all earnings are counted against a recipient's AFDC payments. Reagan thus eliminated an important provision intended by prior administrations as a work incentive. Researchers of The Urban Institute give the following example:

"... a working AFDC mother with three children earning \$450 a month (a below-poverty-level wage) in an average-benefit state would previously have received a monthly AFDC benefit (in 1984 dollars) of about \$230 [on top of her wage]; her [AFDC] benefits have now been reduced to about \$50 per month after four months of employment."<sup>6</sup>

As a result of removing the working poor from the rolls, the number of AFDC recipients declined from 11.1 million in 1980 to 10.5 million in 1982.<sup>7</sup> Some studies indicate different numbers. Joe and Rogers hold on the basis of other studies "that between 10 and 13.7% of the total caseload (or 370,000 to 507,000 families) were dropped from the rolls nationwide."<sup>8</sup> Reagan had simply defined certain groups, particularly the working poor, as 'undeserving,' then terminated their AFDC payments and pushed them in even greater poverty. Many working poor families faced reduced AFDC benefits or became ineligible for AFDC since a larger

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<sup>6</sup> The Urban Institute 1984, p.192

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 1985, p.380, Table 645

<sup>8</sup> Joe and Rogers 1985, p.95

proportion of their earnings was counted against their AFDC benefit level.

In twenty-one states Medicaid eligibility is tied to AFDC eligibility. Loosing AFDC simultaneously means loosing Medicaid. The working poor were particularly prone to loose Medicaid because the Reagan administration limited their AFDC eligibility. Non-AFDC working poor families often can not afford to pay for private health insurance. The fear of loosing Medicaid can be regarded as an additional work-disincentive for AFDC recipients.

Medical services account for the largest share in all social service spending. Therefore, one of Reagan's primary goals was to cut spending for, or at least to reduce the rate of growth of medical services.

Reagan declared on February 18, 1981 that "Medicare will not be cut."<sup>9</sup> Apparently, he could not remember this promise in 1984 when the administration decided to fix rates hospitals and doctors receive for the treatment of Medicare patients.<sup>10</sup> Fixed treatment rates, researchers of The Urban Institute hold, might result in lower quality medical services for the poor because their treatments are financially less attractive than those of privately insured

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<sup>9</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982, p.217

<sup>10</sup> Goggin 1984, pp.74n

patients.<sup>11</sup>

A recent study published in The New England Journal of Medicine examined the availability of a hearing device for Medicare patients. They found that "many hospitals ration the availability of the device to Medicare patients because of the financial losses involved."<sup>12</sup> Though the new technology is undoubtedly superior to other methods of treatment it is often unavailable for Medicare patients because Medicare does not cover the full costs for this kind of treatment. This is true for other kinds of treatments as well.

Furthermore, contributions of the beneficiaries for Medicare services were increased. Sawhill and Palmer of The Urban Institute argue that even "marginal increases boost costs for the near-poor elderly who are too well-off for Medicaid but have difficulty buying supplementary private insurance."<sup>13</sup>

In 1981, the Reagan administration decided that the annual increase in Medicaid spending could not be more than the annual growth of the GNP. Previously, there was not a clearly defined limit in the annual growth rate for Medicaid. While the amount of money spent still increased,

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<sup>11</sup> The Urban Institute 1984, pp.368n and Goggin 1984, pp.75n

<sup>12</sup> Kane and Manoukian 1989, p.1378

<sup>13</sup> The Urban Institute 1984, p.369

the decrease in growth rates resulted in substantial cuts in medical services for many poor. An increase in the poverty rate as was experienced in the Eighties, would normally lead to an increased number of persons eligible for Medicaid; under Reagan their number actually declined despite an increased poverty rate. The number of officially medically needy and elderly, for instance, declined twelve percent between 1980 and 1984 despite a higher poverty rate in 1984.<sup>14</sup> Goggin concludes that the attack against adequate health care for the poor "has been launched on two fronts - dampening demands for services and regulating their supply."<sup>15</sup>

The Reagan administration also cut the Food Stamp program. Eligibility requirements were tightened and the amount of Food Stamps allotted to eligible persons was reduced. Since 1981 Food Stamp eligibility had been restricted to persons whose net income is at the poverty level or below. Near poor families can not receive Food Stamps anymore. Additionally, benefit levels for Food Stamp recipients were cut one percent and inflation adjustments were postponed (in 1981), resulting in a net reduction of benefits for those who were eligible.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Urban Institute 1984, p.370

<sup>15</sup> Goggin 1984, p.76

<sup>16</sup> The Urban Institute 1984, p.367 and Weaver 1984, p.125

In 1982, for the first time in its history, expenditures for the Food Stamp program declined, to \$11.3 billion from \$11.5 billion in 1981, leaving hundreds of thousands of former recipients hungry and malnourished.<sup>17</sup>

The number of Food Stamp recipients in the United States dropped from 22 million in 1980 to 18.3 million in 1987.<sup>18</sup> At the same time the poverty rate increased from 13% to 15.2%. Some 3.2 million more people lived in poverty at the end of Reagan's second term than when he first took office.<sup>19</sup> Today, millions of people in the world's wealthiest nation do not have enough to eat.<sup>20</sup>

Not only have payments and in-kind services for the poor been reduced during Reagan's presidency. Legal Services was under constant attack. It was correctly seen as an instrument of the political left to safeguard the welfare rights of the poor. In 1981, a member of the Republican party put it the following way: "Why should the taxpayers have to cough up \$300 million a year for an elite corps of

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<sup>17</sup> Weaver 1984, pp.124-126

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989, p.365, Table 603

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989, p.452, Table 734

<sup>20</sup> The Washington Post reported on March 27, 1991, that hunger currently afflicts one in eight American children. In West Virginia for example, 18.3% of all children suffer from hunger and another 20.3% are in danger of going hungry. See also Congressional Quarterly 1984a, pp. 5 and 11.

radical lawyers who want to move this country to the left?"<sup>21</sup> It was absurd, according to Reagan, to have the Federal Government pay for lawsuits against itself. Funding for Legal Services was severely curtailed and class-action suits were prohibited during the Reagan years. The severe cuts in legal services left more leeway to slum-dwellers, employers and others to exploit the poor. The legal protection of the poor against arbitrary or wrong decisions of welfare agencies was also reduced.

Even programs which supported the poor in becoming self-sufficient, such as the Community Action Program, were cut by the 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. The Reagan administration replaced the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) with the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1982. JTPA is based on the assumption that publicly created jobs and public job training do not produce the working skills and the work incentives required for work in private businesses. Instead, neoconservatives argue, they merely increase dependency on public resources and are too costly. Therefore, it was proposed that voluntary counsels from the business sector provide their advice to federally funded jobtraining centers. The problem remains, similar to CETA, that the most qualified unemployed are the ones most likely to be considered by JTPA because they offer the

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<sup>21</sup> Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report 1981, p.660

highest success rate with the lowest input costs. Additionally, cutting CETA funded public employment just increases the number of the unemployed. Many of these people appeared be on the welfare rolls soon after having being released from public employment.<sup>22</sup>

Though Reagan's domestic policies had a major impact on the increasing economic inequality in America as above data suggest, other factors such as the structural change of the U.S. economy from industrial to informational modes of capital formation, as well as a declined competitiveness of American products on foreign markets had a clear impact on the condition of the poor.<sup>23</sup> The next section describes in greater detail who gained and who lost as a result of Reagan's domestic policies and the changing economy.

## 2.2. How the Rich Got Richer

The preceding sections have delineated what Reagan took away from the poor and how he did it. Now follows a brief sketch of what Reagan gave to the rich.

The president's 1985 tax proposals were alleged to reduce

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<sup>22</sup> DiNitto and Dye 1987, pp.200 and 205

<sup>23</sup> Examples are the decline of the automobile and steel industries in the so-called Rust Belt in the North-Eastern and North-Central parts of the United States and the emergence of high-tech industries in Silicon Valley in California. Due to these changes in the structure of the US-economy the new poverty of the Eighties often had an unequal regional distribution.

the marginal tax rates for all income levels. In fact, Reagan reduced the marginal tax rate for high income groups (\$82,260 up) from 50% to 35%. However, low income households faced higher taxes. For instance, those earning between \$2480 and \$3670 per year had to pay 11% in income taxes prior to Reagan's proposals. After Reagan's tax reform their tax rate increased four percentage points to 15%, taking desperately needed resources away from the working poor<sup>24</sup>

A study using data provided by the Congressional Budget Office found in 1987 that

"since 1977, the average after-tax family income of the lowest 10%, in current dollars, fell from \$3,825 to \$3157. That's a 10.5 percent drop. During the same period, average family income of the top 10 percent increased from \$70,459 to \$89,783 - up 24.4%. The incomes of the top 1 percent, which were 'only' \$174,498 in 1977, are up to \$303,900 - a whopping 74.2% increase over the decade."<sup>25</sup>

The increasing injustices in the distribution of wealth in the United States during the Eighties can best be portrayed by a look at the real disposable income that was held by different groups of the American population.

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<sup>24</sup> U.S. Government Printing Office 1985, p.9

<sup>25</sup> LaRoe and Pool in Phillips 1990, p.14

Table 2.1

Real Disposable Income Held by Each Income Decile  
of the American Population between 1977 and 1988  
(in 1987 Dollars)<sup>26</sup>

Income Decile	Average Family Income		Percentage Change 1977-1988
	1977	1988	
First	\$ 4,113	\$ 3,504	-14.8%
Second	8,334	7,669	- 8.0
Third	13,140	12,327	- 6.2
Forth	18,436	17,220	- 6.6
Fifth	23,896	22,389	- 6.3
Sixth	29,824	28,205	- 5.4
Seventh	36,405	34,828	- 4.3
Eight	44,305	43,507	- 1.8
Nineth	55,487	56,064	+ 1.0
Tenth	102,722	119,635	+16.5
Top 5%	134,543	166,016	+23.4
Top 1%	270,053	404,566	+49.8

The above table shows that only the richest twenty percent of America's population experienced an increase in its real disposable income during the Reagan years. Eighty percent of the American population had in fact a lower real disposable income in 1988 than in 1977. The poorest income groups had the largest relative decline, or to put it differently, the poorest ten percent of Americans had their real disposable income reduced by almost fifteen percent at the end of the Reagan presidency as compared to 1977. Simultaneously, the real disposable income of the richest one percent increased by almost fifty percent or \$134,513 during the same period of time.

<sup>26</sup> Data from Phillips 1990, p.17, Table 1

Growing injustice is also reflected in the tax rates of the poor and the rich. The 1981 and 1982 tax acts increased the tax rates for low income households and lowered taxes for the rich. Though the 1986 tax act somewhat lowered the taxes for low income levels and slightly increased the tax rates for upper income groups, the overall tendency of the Reagan administration's tax legislation was such as to benefit the rich and punish the poor as the following table reveals.

Table 2.2

Shifts in Effective Federal Tax Rates By  
Population Income Decile between 1977 and 1988<sup>27</sup>

Income Decile	Effective Tax Rates		Percentage Point Change between 1977 and 1988
	1977	1988	
First	8.0%	9.6%	+ 1.6
Second	8.7	8.3	- 0.4
Third	12.0	13.2	+ 1.3
Forth	16.2	16.8	+ 0.6
Fifth	19.1	19.2	+ 0.1
Sixth	21.0	20.9	- 0.1
Seventh	23.0	22.3	- 0.7
Eighth	23.6	23.6	+/-0.0
Nineth	24.5	24.7	+ 0.2
Tenth	26.7	25.0	- 1.7
Top 5%	27.5	24.9	- 2.6
Top 1%	30.9	24.9	- 6.0

<sup>27</sup> Data from Phillips 1990, p.83, Table 3

While low income households faced higher income taxes and reduced government services, capital gains taxes were reduced. As part of supply side economics, businesses and capital owners were 'rewarded' with tax cuts ranging into the billions. Sawhill and Stone of The Urban Institute found that "the 1981 and 1982 tax acts reduced the effective tax rate on income from capital by 14% overall (from 26.4 to 22.8 percent)."<sup>28</sup> Two tax acts, ERTA and TEFRA<sup>29</sup> were projected to reduce corporate taxes by \$92 billion from 1981 when Reagan took office till 1988 when he left.<sup>30</sup>

Generally speaking, the rich got richer during the Eighties on the backs of the poor and the federal budget.

### 2.3. The Eighties: A Decade of Growing Racism, Sexism and Economic Inequality

A number of groups have been traditionally discriminated against on account of their race, religion or sex in America. One way such discrimination was and still is

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<sup>28</sup> The Urban Institute 1984, p.97. The 1986 tax act in contrast to the 1981 and 1982 tax acts reduced the federal income tax for households with very low income.

<sup>29</sup> The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 (ERTA) initiated three successive across-the-board income tax reductions by cumulatively 23% and a massive cut in business taxes. The Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 (TEFRA) on the other hand, reduced the business tax cuts of ERTA significantly in order to consolidate the projected budget deficit.

<sup>30</sup> The Urban Institute 1984, p.298, Table 9.2

visible is these groups' disproportional poverty rate. In 1984, 56.9% of the poor were female and 43.1% were male. The poverty rate for women was 15.9% whereas the poverty rate for men has been 12.8%.<sup>31</sup> In 1987, 54.7% of all children under the age of eighteen living in households headed by single mothers lived in poverty. The corresponding number for the year 1979 was 48.6%.<sup>32</sup> This is currently the largest increase in the poverty rate and, at the same time, the highest poverty rate for any single group of persons in the United States.

Poverty rates for African-Americans and Mexican-Americans continue to be much higher than for Whites. In 1987 for instance, 10.5% of all Whites, 28.2% of all Hispanics and 33.1% of all African-Americans lived in poverty.<sup>33</sup> Poverty rates for racial minorities rose faster during the Eighties than the poverty rate for Whites. The poverty rate for Hispanics rose by 6.4 percentage points between 1979 and 1987. During the same period of time the poverty rate for Whites rose by 1.5 percentage points only.

These statistics reveal that Reagan's welfare cuts primarily impacted traditionally disadvantaged groups. They have decidedly racist and sexist undertones. Of course,

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<sup>31</sup> Subcommittee on Trade, Productivity and Economic Growth 1986, p.10, Table 1.5

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989, p.453, Table 735

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989, p.452, Table 734

Reagan's policies only exacerbated a continuing legacy of racism and sexism in America.

According to Reagan, "the economic program we have put into operation will protect the needy while it triggers the recovery that will benefit all Americans."<sup>34</sup> John Schwarz disagrees:

"The situation encountered by women in the private sector of the economy has always been difficult. Even after very high rates of growth, the private economy left millions of women and their families in poverty, as great a percentage after the economic expansion as before. Traditionally, the job opportunities available to women have been more marginal than those available to men."<sup>35</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Reagan administration's welfare cuts are not the only factor impacting the predicament of the American poor. The 1983 recession causing higher unemployment and world-economic developments contributed to greater poverty but were beyond the direct control of the US-Government. Nonetheless, the administration's welfare cuts significantly worsened the condition of America's poor.

If employed, the incomes for African-Americans and women are substantially lower than for Whites or men. Table 2.3 shows the change of median weekly earnings for selected groups.

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<sup>34</sup> Reagan in The Urban Institute 1984, p.177, own emphasis added

<sup>35</sup> Schwarz 1988, p.29

Table 2.3

Median Weekly Earnings in US\$ for  
African-Americans and Whites Between 1983 and 1987<sup>36</sup>

	1983	1985	1986	1987	Increase (1983-87)	
Black	261	277	291	301	\$40	(15.3%)
Female	231	252	263	275	\$44	(19.0%)
Male	293	304	318	326	\$33	(11.3%)
White	319	355	370	383	\$64	(20.1%)
Female	254	281	294	307	\$53	(20.9%)
Male	387	417	433	450	\$63	(16.3%)

The median weekly earnings for white males rose \$63 from \$387 in 1983 to \$450 in 1987. At the same time earnings for black males rose \$33 from \$293 to \$326. This means, Blacks continued to have substantially lower wages than Whites. Wages for Whites have been growing faster than wages for the respective African-American group. Furthermore, women, no matter whether they are African-American or not, continue to earn much less than the respective male group in particular, and men in general. The long-term implications of this finding are immense: The gap between the races and the genders widened during Reagan's presidency further, dividing the US-society into a male dominated white upper-class and a black under-class mostly consisting of women and children.

And all this happens in the country Reagan referred to as

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989, p.406, Table 666

the "last, best hope of man on earth."<sup>37</sup>

#### 2.4. Conclusions

Part One of this paper has addressed a lesson Ronald Reagan never learned. He did not understand that poverty can not be explained in simple terms. Poverty has many faces: Unemployment, hunger, sickness and despair. Most of the poor are single mothers of underage children and the elderly. They are fathers who want to work but who can not find a job or work for a minimum wage. Poverty continues to have an enormous racial and gender bias. Today, one out of three African-Americans and one out of three persons in female-headed households still live in poverty.

Despite their shortcomings, the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society helped to alleviate the situation of many poor in America. The poverty rate declined from over twenty-two percent in 1959 to about eleven percent in 1979; the number of persons living below the poverty line dropped from forty million to twenty-five million over the same period of time. Hunger and disease among the poor were reduced to a large degree, though not eliminated.

Reagan ignored the progress made during the Sixties and Seventies. He limited and cut the spending for anti-poverty programs. By the end of Reagan's presidency the poverty rate

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<sup>37</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.85

was back over thirteen percent. It climbed to over fifteen percent during his first term in office leaving millions more, particularly women, children and minorities in poverty. Hundreds of thousands of working poor were pushed into even greater poverty because public assistance for them was reduced or eliminated. In conclusion, the poor got poorer and the rich got richer during the Eighties - in large part, though not exclusively, as a direct result of Reagan's social and economic policies.

## PART TWO

### REAGAN'S MYTHS ABOUT POVERTY, THEIR ORIGINS, AND REALITY

The first part of this thesis has shown poverty to be a progressing domestic problem in the United States. Politicians of all political convictions deal with poverty in their own particular ways. During the Sixties and early Seventies government anti-poverty programs were initiated in an attempt to reduce poverty. The basic assumption was that social and economic structures were responsible for poverty. Therefore, structural measures such as financial provisions, medical aid, job training or legal services were regarded as an appropriate means to fight the causes and effects of poverty. In the Seventies, despite some clear successes of the anti-poverty programs, poverty persisted and, simultaneously, the costs for welfare skyrocketed.

The seeming contradiction between exponentially growing welfare expenditures and persisting poverty led parts of the public, some academics and many politicians from structural to traditionally popular 'cultural' explanations of poverty. Cultural explanations ascribe the causes of poverty to the poor themselves. Inadequate mental, moral or biological traits of the poor, as opposed to repressive social, political and economic structures, are considered the causes of poverty according to the 'culturalists.'

Part Two addresses the American political culture and the nature and significance of political myths. Herein lies the

key to understand the real content of Reagan's rhetoric and the public's reaction to it. I will deal with three elements of the American political culture: Egalitarianism, individualistic materialism and racism. They are at the center of America's political and economic belief systems impacting the poor. Materialistic individualism and racism in particular help reinforce the view that the poor deserve to be poor because they are considered unmotivated, incompetent and immoral. Other relevant themes of the American political culture, such as the rejection of government remedies for social problems and the belief in the inherent justice of capitalism can often be derived from one of the above three themes. Individualistic materialism and racism are part of the so called 'cultural' explanation of poverty. The structural view, in contrast, argues that poverty is caused by inadequacies of the social, political or economic order. I will address both views, cultural as well as the structural interpretations of poverty, briefly at the end of Chapter Three.

The next step will be to elucidate on how political myths emerge, why myths are broadly accepted and how they can be demystified. Knowing the cultural background Reagan's rhetoric appealed to, and the theoretical understanding of myths, allow us to understand Reagan's 'real' message. Thus, one can reveal the tacit malevolent connotations of Reagan's seemingly folksy and innocent rhetoric which blamed the poor

for their fate. It was the skill with which he manipulated symbols and the readiness of Americans to be manipulated which help in explaining the relative ease in cutting anti-poverty programs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

#### - PRESUMED INDIVIDUALISM AND SUPERIORITY -

Reagan's rhetoric and the public's acquiescence must be understood in the context of the American political culture. Cultural norms decide to a large measure whether or not rhetoric evokes intended effects.

Dorothy James argues that classical liberalism and ethnocentrism have dominated American political culture for over two centuries.<sup>1</sup> Both help in screening the public from alternative public values because they continually hold up the portrait of a society which is just. They also help maintain the assumption that 'superior individuals' are rewarded materially and that material success is an indicator of superiority. Economic success and failure, accordingly, are not the result of biased social, economic or political structures. Rather, they are ascribed to cultural and biological attributes. Not only materialistic individualism and racism, but also egalitarian themes are common to the American political culture. Egalitarianism in the American context, however, generally has not meant redistribution of wealth, as the following discussion will show.

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<sup>1</sup> James 1972, pp.21-48

### 3.1. American Egalitarianism

Egalitarian themes are, next to materialistic individualism and racism, traditionally a part of the American political culture and psyche. For the most part, however, egalitarianism in America has not been equated with the redistribution of wealth from the haves to the have-nots, as is often the case in the European political cultures. It is associated with more abstract notions of fairness and justice. Although there are several periods in U.S. history where strong movements demanded a redistribution of wealth, they are the exception rather than the rule.

The Populist and Progressive eras, the New Deal and the Great Society mark times when considerable parts of the population demanded more distributive justice. During these periods fairness and justice were defined in terms of increased economic equality. On the other hand, large periods of American history have shown the absence of widespread popular demands for a redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. Redistributive policies have popularly been seen as being inherently unfair and unjust because they supposedly provided the undeserving poor with resources produced by others. In America, notions of fairness and justice are more readily conceived as equality before the law. As such, egalitarian rhetoric in the United States is a two-edged sword. It can be used to support or oppose redistributive policies, more typically the latter.

Support for any form of redistributive policies is more prevalent among small segments of the upper class, specifically intellectuals and members of the knowledge industry, than among the ordinary people.<sup>2</sup> In depth interviews with working-class Americans conducted by Robert Lane in the late 1950s found that most of the interviewees opposed material equality, fearing it would limit freedom. Many interviewees thought that government intervention into economic processes, even if the poor profit, constitutes an illegitimate government intrusion into private affairs, thus limiting the freedom of the individual.<sup>3</sup> The cognitive association of unconstrained economic activity with freedom makes it relatively difficult to mobilize support for redistributive policies, unlike stereotypical sentiments against the poor which are relatively easy to activate. However, the examples of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson demonstrate that rhetorically skillful presidents can, under certain conditions, successfully evoke popular support for redistributive policies.

Axelrod argues there is no clear liberal or conservative strain on the issue of redistribution in the American popular culture, but rather a general suspiciousness of

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<sup>2</sup> Shingles 1989

<sup>3</sup> Lane 1961, pp.17-115

concentrations of power. He characterized this dimension as Populism.<sup>4</sup>

The equivocal meaning of populist attitudes for redistributive policies can be found throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. When either the power of the government or the power of business becomes overwhelming in the eyes of the public, distrust towards the dominant side begins to raise. For instance, during the late nineteenth century and the 1930s, many people felt that big business had become too powerful and was responsible for growing poverty in America. During the 1970s, the public became increasingly concerned with the concentration of power in Washington and the failure of big government to solve America's problems. Reagan capitalized on the growing distrust towards government in order to deregulate the economy and to cut assistance for the have-nots (Section 5.11 will show how he used notions of fairness to stimulate public support for welfare cuts). As Lee Atwater, 1988 Republican Presidential Campaign Manager, put it: "In the 1980 campaign, we were able to make the establishment, insofar as it is bad, the government. In other words, big government was the enemy, not big business."<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, the diffuse notion of equality that exists

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<sup>4</sup> Axelrod 1967, p.59

<sup>5</sup> Atwater in Phillips 1990, p.32

in America can be mobilized either in support of or against redistributive policies. It will be shown that Reagan never had material equality in mind when he talked about equality, justice or fairness. Next follows a discussion of materialistic individualism and racism as other major themes impacting the predicament of the poor.

### 3.2. Materialistic Individualism

Individualism and materialism are at the core of American Liberalism. Materialistic individualism can be traced back to the political theory of John Locke. According to Locke, the sole responsibilities of government, are the protection of its subjects from outside threats and the establishment of laws which grant equal rights to all individuals. He assumes that equal rights for all manifest the inherent justice of the political and the economic systems. To put it differently, equal rights are equated with equal chances for individuals to pursue property.

Among the most basic rights, his argument goes, is the right to accumulate private property<sup>6</sup>. Locke stresses the necessity of unrestrained economic action. In an environment where the economic activities of individuals are not constrained, Locke assumes an individual's wealth to be directly related to the individual's efforts to employ his

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<sup>6</sup> Locke 1980, pp.65-68 ('Of the Ends of Political Society and Government')

energies. Thus, those who are poor can allegedly overcome poverty if they make appropriate efforts. Wealth, Locke maintains, is the reward for those who take risks and engage in economic activities. Despite the differences Locke sees between the rich and the poor, one should keep in mind that he stressed the equality of all men. Crucial for him were not innate differences between human beings, but the role of merit in the accumulation process and the justification for the unconstrained accumulation of capital<sup>7</sup>.

In eighteenth century America, materialistic individualism was the response to monarchy and absolutism in Europe. It offered a liberating alternative in terms of personal and economic freedom to the irrationality and exploitation of European regimes.

By the late nineteenth century, however, Social Darwinists and various religious ideologues in America had appropriated themes of materialistic individualism and employed them as an element to support their notion of inherent human inequality. Social Darwinists argue that human inequality results from the different capacities of human beings to adapt to their social environment. This was simply another version of even earlier ideas dating back to the American colonies. Puritan Protestants then asserted that inequality results from the divinely predestined role

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<sup>7</sup> Locke 1980, pp.17n ('Of Slavery') and pp.18-30 ('Of Property')

of each individual on earth (Predestination theory).

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), a hawkish advocate of Social Darwinism, held that natural and social selection processes ensure the physical, social and economic survival of those who are best adapted to their environment. He asserts:

"The poverty of the incapable, the distress that come upon the improvident, the starvation of the idle, and the shouldering aside of the weak by the strong, which leaves so many in shadows and misery are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence..."<sup>8</sup>

For this reason richness and poverty, power and powerlessness are not the result of social or economic structures but of inherited and unchangeable individual qualities. Thus, he concludes, government can not and should not, interfere in the struggle between individuals. It should not try to decrease inequalities because "no power on earth, no cunningly devised laws of statemanship, no world rectifying schemes of the humane, no communist panaceas, no reforms that men ever did broach or ever will broach, can diminish them one jot..."<sup>9</sup> Instead of improving the condition of the human race, he argues, welfare will prolong suffering because natural selection processes are stifled.

William Graham Sumner, a contemporary of Spencer and professor of political science at Yale, argued that

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<sup>8</sup> Spencer in Mason 1965, p.575

<sup>9</sup> Spencer in Mason 1965, p.576

"millionaires are a product of natural selection, acting on the whole body of men to pick those who can meet the requirements of certain work to be done ... It is because they are thus selected that wealth - their own and that entrusted to them - aggregates under their hands ... They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society."<sup>10</sup>

The period after the Civil War and prior to Populism was one of soaring railroad conglomerates and great steel corporations. Seemingly heroic businessmen enjoyed the public's admiration. As indicated above, Spencer's and Sumner's ideologies built on the idea that the materially successful had superior qualities to the economically unsuccessful. Cochran and Miller argue that Spencer's philosophy "won America as no philosophy ever won a nation before ... In an age of science, it 'scientifically' justified ceaseless exploitation ... it hallowed [wealth] as the sign of the fittest."<sup>11</sup>

During this same period African-Americans were in effect reenslaved and forced into a permanent subservant role in the economy. Mexicans, Chinese and Japanese were exploited in the Far West; and the last of the Native American tribes were defeated and deprived of their lands.

The Protestant work ethic coincided and complemented Spencer's notion of inborn inequality. Puritan Protestantism

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<sup>10</sup> Sumner in Hofstadter 1955b, p.58

<sup>11</sup> Cochran and Miller in Mason 1965, p.576

attributes a divinely predestined mission on earth to each individual. Failure in the earthly life was regarded as divinely ordered punishment. Because it is God's will to punish sinners, those who fail should not be helped. That is to say, puritan Protestants rejected welfare because it runs contrary to the will of God. It was part of the Protestant religious tradition that believers are resigned to the will of God. This requires them to work hard and lead a life pleasing to God. The accumulation of capital was a sign that one had fulfilled his earthly mission.

Thus, religious ideologues hold, along with Spencer, that government can not change the lot of the individual. According to Puritan Protestants, government should not interfere on behalf of the poor because this would disturb the orderly working of society. Russell H. Conwell (1843-1925), a baptist minister, brought Spencer's Social Darwinism and the Protestant work ethic on a common denominator. He preached a 'Gospel of Wealth,' urging his followers "to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich."<sup>12</sup> Wealth is, according to Conwell, the result of the moral superiority of the rich over the poor: "The men who get rich may be the most honest men you find in the community."<sup>13</sup> Helping the poor, he argues would be against the will of God:

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<sup>12</sup> Spencer in Mason 1965, p.596

<sup>13</sup> Spencer in Mason 1965, p.596

"To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins, thus to help him when God would still continue a just punishment, is to do wrong, no doubt about it, and we do that more than we help those who are deserving. While we should sympathize with God's poor - that is, those who cannot help themselves - let us remember that there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings, or by the shortcomings of some one else. It is all wrong to be poor, anyhow."<sup>14</sup>

Twentieth century televangelists have recaptured the themes of nineteenth century religious fundamentalists. Among the best known televangelists in the United States are Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. They reject abortion, homosexuality and promiscuity; and favor issues like school-prayer and boundless capitalism.<sup>15</sup> The content of their telecasts is remarkably close to that of 19th century religious fundamentalists, social darwinists and laissez-faire capitalists. Their political agenda coincides in parts with the political platform of today's Republican Party.<sup>16</sup>

The apparent divine predestination of each individual's earthly life is also a recurring theme in Reagan's rhetoric. He claims that in America "... you can reach as high as your God-given talents will take you."<sup>17</sup> The unspoken message is

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<sup>14</sup> Spencer in Mason 1965, p.597

<sup>15</sup> Fore 1987, pp.95-97

<sup>16</sup> In 1984, for example, Falwell helped Jesse Helms of the Republican Party's extreme right wing win the U.S. Senate race against Jim Hunt of the Democratic Party, then governor of North Carolina.

<sup>17</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1985b, p.86

that all those who 'do not make it' lack God-given talents. Thus, it is not the social or economic structures which determine an individual's status but innate characteristics.

Leading businessmen of the 19th century, such as steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, supported an interpretation of poverty as individual failure. It allowed them to blame the poor, instead of their own exploitation of the poor for poverty. With regard to the tremendous injustices in the distribution of wealth, Carnegie held: "It is well, nay, essential for the progress of the race, that the houses of some should be homes for all that is highest..." Addressing the situation of the poor Carnegie asserts that "it is a waste of time to criticize the inevitable."<sup>18</sup> Rockefeller regards economic struggles as natural selection processes: "The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest."<sup>19</sup>

The twentieth century has shown the continuation of such thoughts. Businessmen like Henry Ford or Lee Iacocca embraced the idea of laissez-faire capitalism. Both are legendary examples that the American Dream is apparently still alive. Both have published widely read books in which they argue in accordance with 19th century social darwinists, laissez-faire economists and contemporary

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<sup>18</sup> Carnegie in Mason 1965, p.599

<sup>19</sup> Rockefeller in Mason 1965, p.579

neoconservatives that the economic status of each individual is exclusively the individual's own merit.<sup>20</sup>

Both Social Darwinism and the Protestant work ethic are at the roots of an almost unquestioned contemporary faith in capitalism. This belief that capitalism works for the benefit of all members of this society is even accepted by many who favor government intervention in the economic cycle to reduce the devastating side-effects of the capitalist production process.<sup>21</sup> Most contemporary American Liberals also accept capitalism. Redistributive or regulatory functions have been taken over by the Federal Government from time to time in order to save capitalism, not to replace it.

Social darwinism as well as the Protestant work ethic and its fundamentalist offsprings are thus essential elements of materialistic individualism. They all helped create and maintain the impression that the accumulation of capital is a worthy goal in itself and a reflection of each individual's capacities to survive and advance in the social world. Poverty is accordingly seen as a condition solely caused and perpetuated by the poor themselves. Proponents of this view argue that government can not, indeed, it should not, make any attempts to help the poor. This would just

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<sup>20</sup> Ford 1922 and Iacocca 1984

<sup>21</sup> Greenberg 1985, p.143n

support their inadequacies at the expense of those who contribute their share to the wealth of the nation. This belief was kept alive and was permanently reinforced in America because individual freedom was usually equated with unconstrained economic activities. Put differently, unconstrained accumulation of wealth is regarded as an indicator of personal freedom and individual merit.

America was and still is regarded as a refuge by many unfree and deprived population in other nations. Yet, the equation of individual freedom with boundless economic freedom has proven to be against the interests of those who are unfree and deprived within the borders of America. It maintains poverty by ascribing inferior capacities to the poor, and thus disallowing structural measures to improve the condition of the disadvantaged.

### 3.3. Racism

It was argued earlier that Dorothy James identified ethnocentrism, parallel to liberalism, as a constituting theme of mainstream American political culture.<sup>22</sup> The dominant form of ethnocentrism in America has always revolved around the national origin, and the cultural and religious heritage of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP's). WASP culture is what people of other cultures and

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<sup>22</sup> James 1972, pp.21-48

other ethnic origins were told or forced to live up to. Ethnocentrism, today as in earlier times is often expressed in overt or subtle forms of racism. Many attempts to put racism on a scientific or religious base have been made. Often they proved to be 'successful' in as far as they reinforced, rationalized or 'scientifically objectified' deeply held racist attitudes in large numbers of people. A 'moral' justification for slavery was found in the presumed mental, moral and biological inferiority of African-Americans to their white slave-holders. Article 1, Section 2, of the Constitution of the United States is explicit about how much inferior some non-WASP groups were considered to the white ruling class: Unfree persons, that is to say, African-Americans were considered worth three-fifths of a free person. American-Indians were valued as nothing. Slogans like 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian' uncover the prevalent attitudes of the 19th century.

As mentioned earlier, Herbert Spencer regarded the struggle between different cultures and ethnic groups as part of a natural selection process in which only the fittest survive. He asserted: "For if mental as well as physical characteristics could be inherited, the intellectual powers of the race would become cumulatively greater, and over several generations the ideal man would

finally be developed.<sup>23</sup> Spencer implied that the cultural norms and the biological characteristics of Whites with Anglo-Saxon Protestant background would be superior to other people.

Others, who were always portrayed as symbolic figures in the struggle for racial equality often had deeply held racist attitudes. Lincoln asserted in 1857:

"There is a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people at the idea of indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races; ... I protest against the counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife. I need not have her for either, I can just leave her alone. In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others."<sup>24</sup>

This shows that racism encompasses more than formal inequality. It is a state of mind. It did not disappear, neither after the Civil War nor after the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s. Rather, racism changed its forms. While open and manifest in the legal system in earlier times, it remains deep in the psyche of the American mind set.

Nowadays, similar to a century or two ago, racism is a vital part of the American political culture which offers

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<sup>23</sup> Spencer in James 1972, p.33

<sup>24</sup> Lincoln in James 1972, p.35

easy-to-understand explanations for social and economic troubles. V.O. Key found in his study Southern Politics in State and Nation (1949) that racism in upper and lower class Whites stems from different motivations. Upper class Whites, he maintains, have an economic interest in racism. They ignite tensions between lower class Whites and non-whites, particularly African-Americans, to keep wages low, to weaken labor unions and to shift the focus of the lower classes away from class conflict to race conflict. Lower class Whites, Key argues, found racism to be 'serviceable' to them. It allows them to blame other groups for their bad living conditions. Many lower class whites build much of their self-respect on the fact that they regard people of other ethnic origin as inferior to themselves.

The more overt racism was fought by legislative and legal means in the second half of the twentieth century, the more did it take on subtle forms. Blumer (1965) argues that 'color lines' divide the White and non-white population in the United States. He defined the color line as "a line which separates whites and Negroes, assigning to each a different position in the social order and attaching to each a differential set of rights, privileges and arenas of action."<sup>25</sup>

Blumer identifies three color lines. The outer color line

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<sup>25</sup> Blumer 1965, p.322

is symbolized in the still ongoing struggle of non-whites, particularly African-Americans, to get "free access to public accommodations and public institutions, the enjoyment of the franchise, the equal protection of laws, and equal rights as consumers."<sup>26</sup> The intermediate color line revolves around things such as equal chances for people of all ethnic groups to get the same quality of education, equal pay for equal work, and the same job opportunities. Both the outer and the intermediate color lines can, to a certain degree be fought by legislative means. The inner color line, however, can not be broken by any legal or government actions. "Its presence can be noted most clearly among whites who are willing to accept Negroes as having equal social status," Blumer holds, "yet who are not disposed to admit them into intimate and private circles."<sup>27</sup>

The Civil Rights legislation of the Sixties as well as welfare legislations partly penetrated the outer and intermediate color lines though they were by far not sufficient to overcome them. The inner color line gained significance because no law can destroy it. Rather, legislative activities to flatten the outer and intermediate color lines cause many Whites to entrench behind the inner

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<sup>26</sup> Blumer 1965, p.328

<sup>27</sup> Blumer 1965, p.335

color line. It is thus a resort to keep racism alive. This explains why despite some efforts to fight racism by legal means and the reduction of open racism in the 1960s, racism is still alive and powerful in America. It has not left the people's minds. Reagan's rhetoric about the 'undeserving' poor revived the stereotype that Blacks are disproportionately poor and that they are poor because they do not want to work. The message that gets across is 'Blacks do not want to work. That's why they're poor.' Reagan hardly mentioned African-Americans when he talked about poverty, but many Whites' perception of the poor is deeply informed by racist stereotypes which have been passed down through generations. Sections 5.1 and 5.12 of this thesis discuss in greater detail how Reagan subtly categorized the poor into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' and how he played down the extent of racism in 20th century America.

Making race-relations a public issue often subtly reinforces the image that members of the ruling white group are superior to others.<sup>28</sup> First, those who dominate decide whether or not non-whites actually get the same rights. Second, they provide the means to enforce formal equality. This means the administrative 'production of equality' leaves the impression that the mere fact of granting equality shows the moral superiority and the inherent good-

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<sup>28</sup> Edelman 1971, pp.38n

will of those who grant it. Those who are granted equal rights are subtly categorized as inferior because their 'inadequacies' made them previously inferior and now they take advantage of the dominant group which has to burden 'sacrifices' in order to ensure equality.

For the purposes of this thesis it is important to keep in mind that the self esteem of many Whites is still built on the presumed inferiority of members of other ethnic groups, particularly African-Americans, Hispanics, Orientals and Native Americans. Furthermore, racism offers simple explanations for social and economic difficulties in the eyes of many. It never disappeared from mainstream American political culture because generation after generation of Whites apparently had a personal or economic interest in keeping racism alive.

Both materialistic individualism and racism directly ascribe poverty to the apparent failures or inadequacies of those who are poor. The economically successful, and most of those who want nothing more than to be economically successful, found materialistic individualism and racism easy ways to define their present and presumed future social and economic achievements.

#### 3.4. Explanations of Poverty

Poverty is often described as having either cultural or structural causes. Structural causes of poverty include all

those which cause poverty from the outside such as economic, political or social conditions which are beyond the control of the individual. The exogenous variables which cause poverty are often influenced or controlled by those who have economic or political power.<sup>29</sup> The structural perspective does not ascribe any particular personal or moral characteristics to the poor which would be significantly different from the non-poor. Chaim Waxman, discussing the cultural perspective, points out that

"the poor behave differently not because they possess their own unique value system, but, on the contrary, because they have internalized the dominant values but do not have the opportunity to realize these values through the socially sanctioned avenues."<sup>30</sup>

The anti-poverty programs of the Great Society discussed in Chapter One mark an effort to fight the structural causes of poverty. Neither ineptitude nor a lack of motivation on the side of the poor, but biased social and economic structures were regarded as the major causes of poverty.

The cultural perspective, in contrast, sees poverty as caused or perpetuated by endogenous traits of the poor themselves. The culturalists can be divided into two rival camps: One acknowledges the existence of a 'culture of poverty' rooted in structural causes but resulting in

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<sup>29</sup> Waxman 1986, Chapter 2

<sup>30</sup> Waxman 1986, p.27, own emphasis added

socialization processes and value orientations of the poor which are significantly different from the rest of society. They conclude that poverty perpetuates itself in the culture of poverty (in which the materially deprived develop their own social and behavioral norms) brought into being by structural causes.<sup>31</sup>

Those of the other camp of culturalists (social darwinists, laissez-faire economists, and neoconservatives of which Ronald Reagan is a prime example), argue that the poor have innate mental or moral characteristics, different from the non-poor, which cause poverty. This group does not acknowledge the impact of socio-economic factors and socialization processes on poverty. Rather, the socio-economic situation of the poor is considered their own fault, caused and perpetuated by their personal ineptitude. Such a view has vast policy consequences: If one applies the logic of these culturalists, poverty can not be fought by structural means such as financial aid or in-kind provisions. Poverty, they argue, is perpetuated or even increased by such measures because the poor become dependent on outside provisions. According to the proponents of this view, poor educational achievement, crime, mental disorders, drug addiction, etc., are not caused by poverty but are elements inherent in the nature of the poor. They regard

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<sup>31</sup> Harrington 1964 and Lewis 1966 support this view; Lewis (1966) coined the term 'culture of poverty.'

capitalism as inherently sound and just; in order to overcome poverty, they argue, the poor have to be changed.<sup>32</sup> Reagan's rhetoric reinvigorated these themes discrediting the poor, racial minorities and government programs on their behalf (see Chapter Five, particularly Sections 5.7, 5.8 and 5.9).

Capitalism, the protestant work ethic, religious fundamentalists, social darwinists, today's neo-conservatives and Ronald Reagan stand in sharp contrast to structural explanations of poverty. They represent the cultural view which ascribes inadequate personal and moral characteristics to the poor.

Since the mid-Seventies neoconservative ideologies have gained ground. They claim that liberal politicians and intellectuals initiated an excessive growth of government and public spending in the Sixties with no significant positive effect on the situation of the poor. Charles Murray, one of the leading neo-conservatives in the USA asserts that the poverty rate grew from 18.2% in 1968 to 22% in 1980 if government transfers to the poor are not considered, implying that many poor are trapped in welfare dependency, thus increasing the poverty rate.<sup>33</sup> He concludes that government anti-poverty programs caused an

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<sup>32</sup> Waxman discusses the culturalist's view (1986, pp.7-26)

<sup>33</sup> Murray 1984, pp.64n

increase in poverty because the poor were taken the incentives to become self-sufficient. Two examples illustrate the problems afflicted with Murray's assertion. First, the unemployment rate doubled between 1969 and 1975 (from four percent to eight percent), mainly as a result of the oil-price shocks and the recession of 1973/74. Along with greater unemployment comes an unavoidable increase in the poverty rate. Thus, government anti-poverty programs were instrumental in avoiding even greater poverty. Second, studies found that cash-transfers and in-kind provisions do not in reality create dependency. Most of the poor are poor for a relatively short period of time. Only two percent of the US-population are considered long-term poor. The overwhelming part of the long-term poor, however, has almost no chance to become self-sufficient because they are either too old or incapacitated in some other way.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Murray's conclusion that the poverty rate grew because government transfers supposedly create dependency seems invalid.

The situation of the poor, Murray holds, was publicly characterized as 'victimization.' Therefore, he argues, it was relatively easy for liberals to create and maintain public support for welfare spending. Murray regards poverty as the result of a lack of motivation or as moral and

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<sup>34</sup> Institute for Social Research 1983/84, pp.3-5

personal failures on the part of the poor. Public spending in the Sixties and Seventies, he holds, created a welfare culture which alienated the poor from the labor force, society in general, and the American ideal of self-sufficiency. He suggests, in accordance with the American political culture, to create disincentives to force the poor off welfare and into the labor force.

Reagan's attack on the welfare state addressed in Chapter Two (see particularly Section 2.1) follows the logic of neoconservative academics like Murray. However, the predicament of the poor worsened considerably throughout the 1980s, mainly due to Reagan's welfare cuts (see Section 2.3).

Murray claims that his proposals are not intended to release government of its responsibility to provide for the have-nots. Rather, he claims, he and other neo-conservatives are driven by moral grounds, such as to free the poor from artificially created dependency and to illustrate to them the value of self-sufficiency. No matter what he claims, his argument is in accordance with Social Darwinists and religious fundamentalists because he basically blames the poor for being poor and suggests cuts in public spending to push the poor into the labor force.

Chapter Five will reveal that Reagan's rhetoric on the causes and effects of poverty reinvigorates stereotypes and welfare myths upheld by the American political culture. It

also fits neatly into the scientific patterns of explanations of Murray and other neo-conservatives such as Gilder, Huntington, Crozier and Watanuki.<sup>35</sup>

One can conclude that myths brought forward by the American political culture and today's conservatives, rather than facts dominate the explanation of poverty. The following chapter explains the nature and the significance of myths in political mobilization processes.

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<sup>35</sup> see for example Gilder 1981, Huntington 1981, and Huntington, Crozier and Watanuki 1975

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MYTH AND REALITY

We often believe what we want to believe. Information which fits our preconceptions of social phenomena is likely to be considered 'real,' regardless of its veracity. The culture we live in largely determines what we believe.<sup>1</sup> The preceding chapter on the American political culture described stereotypes and myths which dominate perceptions about the poor and minorities. Rhetoric which employs these stereotypical and mythical views to explain poverty is more likely to be believed and understood than more complex and obscure structural explanations.

This chapter demonstrates (1) how political myths emerge and why they are widely accepted, (2) how the messages of myths can be demystified, and (3) the political significance of myths.

More specifically, I will address the following: (To 1) Generally, it is easier to reinforce existing attitudes and

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<sup>1</sup> Since 'reality' is subject to cultural interpretation one can assume the existence of 'multiple realities.' Multiple realities means that members of various social or cultural groups perceive the same social phenomenon differently because their presumptions vary. Each 'reality' has validity for those who share it. But, accepting the existence of multiple realities does not mean every 'reality' has the same validity. They may be more accurate or less accurate about the 'real' nature of the phenomena they describe and therefore differ in their validity.

beliefs than to create new ones.<sup>2</sup> Reagan had a clear advantage in appealing to traditional American cultural norms. (To 2) In many cases rhetorical cues are sufficient to communicate whole arrays of meaning.<sup>3</sup> The fact that cues or keywords can transmit meaning without being explicit is of central importance for this thesis. Reagan effectively manipulated popular prejudices towards the poor and minorities without ever being explicit in his intent. A question has to be asked in this context: (To 3) Who profits from political myths? The answer to this question shows the political and social consequences which result from the creation and acceptance of political myths. In this paper, the impact of political myths on the situation of the poor will be investigated.

#### 4.1. The Emergence and Acceptance of Mythical Reality

Murray Edelman examines language forms and rhetorical devices which justify social inequality. He asserts that "we commonly take inequality for granted while regarding mass challenges to it as a 'phenomenon' calling for inquiry."<sup>4</sup> Recurring social problems such as poverty, prevalent interpretations of them and commonly employed language forms

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<sup>2</sup> Cooper 1989, pp.69-76; Elder 1983, p.54; Rokeach 1972, pp.3-21 and 112-148

<sup>3</sup> Elder 1983, pp.81-111

<sup>4</sup> Edelman 1977, p.2

to describe them reinforce each other and make the problem more acceptable to the public by subtly categorizing poverty as both, acceptable and immutable.<sup>5</sup>

The complexity of the social world often requires us to simplify, generalize and categorize in political discourse. Political leaders can take advantage of this by employing vague language forms and expressions to consciously or subconsciously veil complex facts and create simplistic realities. Myths serve this purpose.

Edelman defines myth as "an unquestioned belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning."<sup>6</sup> Elder asserts that "myths present culturally defined truths in the form of stories, parables and aphorisms that simplify, highlight, or dramatize basic cultural premises or prescriptions."<sup>7</sup> The impact of cultural norms on the creation of myths, as stressed by Elder, is crucial. Many people tend to believe in racist and material individualistic myths because they give 'events and actions a particular meaning' and restate or rationalize what people already believe.

Barthes adds that mythologies portray "a world without contradictions because it is without depth, a world which is

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<sup>5</sup> Edelman 1977, p.3

<sup>6</sup> Edelman 1971, p.53

<sup>7</sup> Elder 1983, p.54

open and wallowing in the evident.<sup>8</sup> The intelligibility of myths encourages their acceptance over complex but more accurate explanations of social problems. Chapter Five will demonstrate by means of excerpts from Reagan's speeches how he rhetorically created a world without contradictions, full of brotherhood and hope (see Sections 5.12 'The Brotherhood of Man' and 5.13 'The Rebirth of Hope').

Several cognitive patterns facilitate the acceptance of myths. People perceive selectively, i.e., they perceive things best which fit into already existing patterns of explanation. Furthermore, selective remembrance and selective exposure contribute to the reinforcement of established beliefs since they consciously or unconsciously prevent the exposure to and the consideration of alternative interpretations of an issue.<sup>9</sup>

The acceptance of myths is, in a general sense, an emotional rather than a rational process. Edelman asserts that feeling "is part of understanding."<sup>10</sup> Appealing to feelings allows political leaders to enter a relationship of presumed mutual understanding with their subjects. Most people are willing to follow leaders if their expressed thoughts and feelings form a unity with their own. Popular

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<sup>8</sup> Barthes 1983, p.132

<sup>9</sup> Cooper 1989, pp.97n, Manheim 1982, pp.107-113

<sup>10</sup> Edelman 1971, p.58

political leaders can use this bond to determine the political agenda. They can define what issues are 'relevant' and what is to be ignored. Reagan's popularity - largely based on an emotionally laden personal charm - served him to this end. He strengthened his bond with the public by skillfully emphasizing valence issues.<sup>11</sup> These are rhetorically created issues having no real significance. They are commonly employed in order to distract from actual problems. For example, the question whether burning the American flag should be a constitutional right or not was a major debate during Reagan's second term in office. Just by taking a tough stand against the right to burn the flag, Reagan supported his image of being a patriotic American. He accomplished the same thing by emphasizing national defense.

Nevertheless, the flag debate provided a distraction from more substantial political issues, such as the growing budget deficit and the Federal Government's role in the redistribution of income in the United States. The silent but undeniable message for large parts of the public was: 'If Reagan can fight for the flag he stands for the people,' thus veiling that Reagan's domestic policies in fact worked against the interests of the working and middle classes. Furthermore, cuts in welfare were rendered patriotic since Reagan stated that this involved routine efforts to cut

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<sup>11</sup> Campbell 1966, pp.170nn

cheats off welfare (see Sections 5.2 'Ending Waste and Fraud' and 5.3 'The Budget Deficit'). At the same time he reassured the poor "that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts."<sup>12</sup> In this case, presidential rhetoric was accepted as 'true' by the public because it fitted into already existing and desired patterns of thinking. He expressed what everybody wanted to hear: Promises about a better future. Hardly anybody seemed to care whether he was saying the truth or not. Materialistic individualism, racism, and the adherence to formal rather than to material equality as discussed in Chapter Three provide the cultural presumptions on which Reagan's myth build.

Alternative policies are often not considered by the public or they are consciously rejected because officially created fears evoke strong emotions against them. As Edelman puts it: "A key condition of the domination of cognition by a political myth is the disposition of the anxious mind to take perceptions of present constraints as immutable: to avoid exploration of alternative possibilities."<sup>13</sup>

Other ways to put the public's mind at ease with the 'dangers of the world' are misinformation and promises no one can keep. Neither the validity of information nor the

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<sup>12</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982b, p.217

<sup>13</sup> Edelman 1971, p.43

workability of promises are important; all that counts is the public's belief in the information given. Reagan, indeed, frequently made impossible or contradictory statements like the following given in his 1986 Budget Message: "This budget shows moreover, that eliminating the deficit is possible without raising taxes, without sacrificing our defense preparedness, and without cutting into legitimate programs for the poor and elderly."<sup>14</sup> Part One of this paper clearly shows that this statement does not reflect the facts.

#### 4.2. The Demystification of Political Myths

It is necessary to separate the silent and subliminal meanings of a message from its denotative content to understand its true purpose. The demystification of political myths is far from easy because the manifest content of a communicative act might be significantly different from its latent content.

#### Political Language

In 1946, George Orwell remarked in his essay "Politics and the English Language" that "political language ... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable,

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<sup>14</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987b, p.53; Exactly one year later, in his 1987 Budget Message, Reagan repeated this statement literally (Congressional Quarterly 1988a, p.7)

and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."<sup>15</sup>

Edelman (1977) differentiates between four political languages: The political language of the helping professions, the language of bureaucracy, the language of inquiry (formal language) and the language of authority (public language). I am concerned with formal and public language only.

Edelman's analytical distinction between formal language (the language of inquiry) and public language (the language of authority) allows us to uncover hidden meanings of, and simplifications in, political speeches.

Formal language requires its user to be aware of the distinction between causes and effects, and description and interpretation of phenomena. Also, alternative and rivaling views have to be considered because they might contain a legitimate critique of one's own point of view.<sup>16</sup> Formal language means to "remain aware of the intimate link between how one thinks, what one perceives, and what conclusions are reached."<sup>17</sup>

Public language, in contrast, consists of

"simple and sometimes unfinished sentences, unconventional syntax, frequent repetition of a small number of idiomatic phrases, little qualification, and

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<sup>15</sup> Orwell 1956, p.366

<sup>16</sup> Edelman 1977, p.104

<sup>17</sup> Edelman 1977, p.108

reliance on the very incompleteness of exposition to demonstrate implicit understanding between speaker and audience."<sup>18</sup>

Reagan's public speeches are replete with these traits. For instance, he closed his State of the Union Addresses with references to 'American Heroes,' persons whom he portrayed as embodying the American way of life. "God bless you, and God bless America"<sup>19</sup> or similar testimonies were the last words of many of his public speeches. The flagrant use of symbols allowed him to appeal to public sentiments without having to worry about substance.

Since public language requires communicative forms and cultural presumptions shared by speaker and audience, it "validates established beliefs and strengthens the authority structure of the polity or organization in which it is used."<sup>20</sup> For this reason it is largely used by representatives of any kind of organization "to demonstrate to others and themselves that they deserve support, ... to evoke feelings in support of the polity, and to engender suspicion of alternatives and of people identified as hostile."<sup>21</sup>

Edelman specifies three types of terms used in public

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<sup>18</sup> Edelman 1977, p.109

<sup>19</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1988b, p.115

<sup>20</sup> Edelman 1977, p.109

<sup>21</sup> Edelman 1977, p.109

language to limit the universe of political thought, discourse and action. First, there are terms which classify individuals and groups in terms of their personal or moral traits, such as 'criminals,' 'smokers,' 'drug addicts,' the 'truly needy' or the 'undeserving poor.' These terms appear purely descriptive and based on observation, but by classifying individuals, they also evaluate them.<sup>22</sup> Labeling a poor person as 'deserving' or 'undeserving' seems to be purely descriptive at first, whereas in fact, a whole array of value premises is communicated with these terms. The notion of the undeserving poor connotes that this person (or group) is responsible for poverty on his or her own, that is to say, any structural explanation of poverty is excluded. It also suggests that these persons should not receive welfare provisions because they could be self-sufficient if they would make appropriate efforts (see Section 5.1 'The Truly Needy' which discusses Reagan's rhetoric about the 'undeserving' poor in greater detail).

Second, terms exist "that implicitly define an in-group whose interests conflict with those of other groups."<sup>23</sup> Terms like 'American' versus 'Unamerican' evoke allegiance with one side just because the other side of the spectrum supposedly does not share the same set of values. This

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<sup>22</sup> Edelman 1977, p.110

<sup>23</sup> Edelman 1977, p.111

creates irrational feelings of loyalty for one's own group at the same time defining the 'alien world' in undifferentiated terms. An example for this can be found in Reagan's second Inaugural Address. Talking about the accomplishments of the American society he stated: "It is the American sound. It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair."<sup>24</sup> One can conclude that everything that is not American is hopeless, small-hearted, unidealistic, and unfair. Section 5.6 deals with 'The Evils of Socialism' as portrayed by Ronald Reagan. The way Reagan defines the values associated with the American way of life implies that the norms of other political orders are considered a threat.

Third, there are presentational forms that are intended to evoke sympathy for the policies of political leaders.<sup>25</sup> These presentational forms can be expert hearings in Congress, kissing children during an election campaign or summit meetings at historical locations. Their purpose is to evoke confidence in the leader's symbolic policy goals, thereby distracting attention from the content of policies.

Edelman's differentiation of public language into its components allows one to identify several commonly employed techniques in public speech acts which subtly create

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<sup>24</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1986a, p.46

<sup>25</sup> Edelman 1977, p.112

fictional realities. Elements of political rhetoric which veil rather than uncover facts can thus be pinpointed. This knowledge can contribute to the demystification of public speech. It aids in separating emotional and value-laden categorizations and presentational forms from empirical facts.<sup>26</sup>

The above discussion of formal and public language should have shown that as "formal language is precise in its statements of fact and of logical relationships, and in distinguishing reasons from conclusions, so it is also explicit in distinguishing affect from meaningful propositions." Public language, in contrast, "encourages its user and his audience to confuse reasons with conclusions and affect with meaning."<sup>27</sup> In political communication, however, neither of these language forms is employed in its purest form. Rather, they intermingle. The differentiation between them therefore serves analytical purposes only.

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<sup>26</sup> Noam Chomsky offers a way to increase our understanding of how apparently unambiguous language penetrates into the individual's realm of emotions and values. He differentiates between surface structures and deep structures in language. Surface structures are grammatical and syntactical arrangements which are not necessarily meaningful by themselves. Deep structures, however, are the meanings conveyed by surface structures. The 'right' interpretation of deep structures requires that sender and recipient of a message have a similar comprehension of cultural norms (Chomsky 1966 and 1968). The analytical usefulness of the distinction between surface and deep structures is in supporting the finding that language forms convey meaning without being explicit about it.

<sup>27</sup> Edelman 1977, p.108

### The Role of Metaphors in Political Mythologies

Metaphors are common to political language. A metaphor creates imaginary resemblances of one sort of object or structure to another with significantly different functions. It "intensifies selected perceptions and ignores others, thereby helping one to concentrate upon desired consequences of favored public policies.<sup>28</sup> Thus, metaphors create factual premises about phenomena.<sup>29</sup> "Political metaphors also create and filter out value premises."<sup>30</sup>

Calling for a 'War on Drugs,' for instance, suggests a good fight. It insinuates the need to fight with all means possible (war). At the same time, the rhetoric identifies drug-related persons as enemies. Finally, it shifts the focus away from socio-economic explanations of drug use to law and order and to a simplistic debate of good versus evil. In the end, the war is fought against the victims of drugs not against the causes of drug use. The same is true for the 'War on Poverty' to some degree.

Edelman argues that a metaphorical view, once accepted, "becomes the organizing conception into which the public thereafter arranges items of news that fit and in the light of which it interprets the news." By doing so "a particular

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<sup>28</sup> Edelman 1971, p.67, own emphasis added

<sup>29</sup> Edelman 1971, p.70

<sup>30</sup> Edelman 1971, p.70

view is reinforced and repeatedly seems to be validated for those whose attitudes it expresses. It becomes self-perpetuating.<sup>31</sup> Metaphor, therefore, is frequently employed to create political support for desired policies. Oppositional and alternative views are discredited because they apparently lack the consistency and the 'neatness' of the predominant metaphorical view.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, metaphors, like mythologies in general, contribute to create and uphold ideologies. Political myths may lead people to support policies which seem to be in their interests, whereas in fact, they are contradictory to their interests.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Edelman 1971, p.72

<sup>32</sup> Edelman 1971, p.68

<sup>33</sup> Critical theory makes an analytical distinction between 'real' and 'expressed' interests. Real interests are these interests an individual would express were he or she aware of the conditions which limit his or her free reasoning and expression. Connolly defines 'real interests' preliminary as: "Policy x is more in A's real interest than policy y if A, were he to experience the results of both x and y, would choose x as the result he would rather have for himself" (1983, p.64). For a discussion of 'interests,' particularly about the analytical and emancipatory notion of 'real interests' see Connolly 1972 and 1983, pp.45-89.

An example how Reagan blinded the American people about its interests can be found in his speech on Economic Recovery on February 18, 1981: "This proposal for an equal reduction in everyone's tax rates will expand our national prosperity, enlarge national incomes, and increase opportunities for all Americans" (Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982b, p.221). He did not mention that the across-the-board tax cuts favor the rich over-proportionally while the low income groups or those without income have little or no advantages from the tax cuts.

### 4.3. Language, Ideology, and Power

The preceding sections have examined the emergence and acceptance of mythical realities and ways and means to unveil the 'true' meaning of political myths. Here I would like to address the question 'Who profits and who suffers from political myths?'

Everyday language usually defines those who are economically and politically powerful as meritorious and those who are poor as a societal burden. It is for this reason that policies in favor of the haves, such as tax reductions for upper income levels, are regarded as routine processes which are considered beneficial for society. At the same time, policies in favor of the poor are controversial and face opposition<sup>34</sup>. Thus, the power of the ruling classes maintains itself, since once it is established, it ensures that the beliefs of subordinate classes are shaped so as to accept and support policies in favor of their rulers. The victims of repressive social, political and economic systems might consider themselves happy, prosperous and contented just because they are effectively screened from the vision of alternative and better orders.

Addressing this phenomena, Connolly holds that "the happy slave is happy because alternative possibilities in his real

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<sup>34</sup> Edelman 1977, p.39

interest are effectively screened from him, and that could be true, to a lesser extent, of the contented blue collar worker, the apathetic prisoner, and the happy hooker."<sup>35</sup> The close connection between the acceptance of political myths and presumed security and happiness makes it harder for the individual to consider alternatives (see Sections 5.10 'Traditional American Values' and 5.13 'The Rebirth of Hope').

Social conditioning and brainwashing do their job by inoculating political myths into the public mind. Edelman asserts:

"Americans are taught at home, in the schools, and in pervasive political rhetoric that America is the land of equal opportunity; that there is equality before the law; that government accurately reflects the voice of the people, but does not shape it; that political and economic values are allocated fairly. Given such opportunity, those who are poor are inclined to attribute their unhappy condition to their own failings and inadequacies."<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, "the American poor have required less coercion and less social security guarantees to maintain their quiescence than has been true in other developed countries ... for the guilt and self-concepts of the poor have kept them docile."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Connolly 1983, p.63

<sup>36</sup> Edelman 1971, p.55

<sup>37</sup> Edelman 1971, p.56

Reagan used the status of the presidential office to strengthen negative sentiments against the poor. Instead of employing the power of the presidency to alleviate the fate of the most deprived of this country, he took his rhetorical skill and his position as president to ignite conflicts within the lower and middle classes for the benefit of the rich. One can conclude, along with Luke, that the state (especially if it is headed by rhetorical leaders like Reagan) in an informational society like ours "can be seen as a scheduler, director, and programmer, constructing contexts for collaboration by its subjects or conflict among them with the assistance of business and industry..."<sup>38</sup>

Power and powerlessness in our days are not anymore primarily functions of formal equality and access to economic resources. Rather, they are a reflection of the capacity to steer emotions. Those who create and convey values and norms, that is to say, those who direct the flow of political myths, possess power. Domination in modern western societies is thus not anymore built around the suppression and exploitation of the body but on the suppression and exploitation of the mind.

Foucault, after investigating how power is exercised in modernity as compared to earlier times argues:

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<sup>38</sup> Luke 1989, p.49

"We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms ... In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production."<sup>39</sup>

Admittedly, this is a negative, but realistic portrait of modernity. The example of Ronald Reagan proved once again that the ideas of mass publics can be shaped by demagogues.

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<sup>39</sup> Foucault 1979, p.194, own emphasis added

### PART THREE

#### THE PRESIDENT AND THE PUBLIC

The question of this paper is: Why was there no widespread public resistance against Reagan's policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich? I argued that mainstream American political culture, which has materialistic individualism, racism and equality defined as equality before the law at its core, portrays the poor as undeserving. It does not allow for structural explanations of poverty. Poverty is regarded as being the result of moral, mental or biological inadequacies of the poor. These cultural preconceptions trigger the acceptance of disparaging myths about the poor. The myths serve the politically and economically powerful by creating tensions between the working and non-working population.

Part Three of this thesis deals with the success Reagan had in propagating the cultural view of poverty. The success of political rhetoric can be measured in its capacity to manipulate or control an audience's perception of social phenomena. Chapter Five deals with the content of Reagan's speeches bearing on the poor. Rhetoric is most successful if it builds on existing beliefs of the audience. The rhetoric of Ronald Reagan skillfully accomplished this end. He revived and reinforced the long held prejudices of many Americans.

Chapter Six contains an examination of the public opinion

towards welfare recipients and government intervention on behalf during the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties. Data gathered in opinion polls reveals that large percentages of the public believe in myths conveyed by the American political culture. The presidential elections of the 1980s show that a majority of the voters favored the conservative political agenda of the Republicans over the Democrats. Both public opinion towards the poor and the (re-) election of an arch-conservative president are a measure of agreement and support for the policies pursued and proposed by the Reagan administration. These measures help in explaining the absence of widespread public resistance against the growing economic inequalities in the Eighties.

Part Three is intended to reveal the interaction that took place between Reagan and the public. I do not argue that the public changed its attitudes towards the poor exclusively due to Reagan's rhetoric. I also do not argue that the public independently became more resentful towards the poor in the 1980s. Put differently, neither Reagan's rhetoric by itself nor preexisting public attitudes alone are independent variables. Rather, the interaction of Reagan's rhetoric and preexisting public attitudes constitute the independent variable bearing on growing public hostility towards welfare recipients, thus easing the Reagan administration's efforts to shift wealth from the poor to the rich.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE REDEEMER'S MESSAGE

"We're in control here. There's nothing wrong with America that together we can't fix. I'm sure there will be some who will raise the familiar old cry, 'Don't touch my program; cut somewhere else.' I hope I've made it plain that our approach has been evenhanded, that only the programs for the truly deserving needy remain untouched. The question is, are we simply going to go down the same path we've gone down before, carving out one special program here, another special program there? I don't think that's what the American people expect of us. More important, I don't think that is what they want. They're ready to return to the source of our strength.

The substance and prosperity of our nation is built by wages brought home from the factories and the mills, the farms, and the shops. They are the services provided in 10,000 corners of America; the interest on the thrift of our people and the return for risk-taking. The production of America is the possession of those who build, serve, create and produce.

For too long now, we've removed from our people the decisions on how to dispose of what they created. We have strayed from first principles. We must alter our course.

The taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate purposes. It must not be used to regulate the economy or bring about social change. We've tried that, and surely we must be able to see it doesn't work.

Spending by government must be limited to those functions which are the proper province of government. We can no longer afford things simply because we think of them. Next year we can reduce the budget by \$41.4 billion, without harm to government's legitimate purposes or to our responsibility to all who need our benevolence."<sup>1</sup>

Positive themes and images pervade Reagan's public speeches. Yet his rhetoric was structured such as to convey negative emotions towards selected social groups or

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982b, p.223

political issues. Reagan reinforced preexisting negative attitudes and feelings towards the poor, but often without criticizing them directly or mentioning them at all. One even gets the impression that he 'felt sorry' for, and was sympathetic to, the poor. He left it to the public to draw negative conclusions about the poor from his remarks.

Chapter Four has stressed the importance of separating the latent from the manifest content of myths. Now, several aspects of Reagan's rhetoric will be studied in an attempt to evaluate what he really said about the poor.

An analysis of Reagan's speeches reveals thirteen common themes bearing on the poor. These themes have in common that they in one way or another blame the poor for being poor and thus convey that government is not obliged to help the poor. In particular these themes are: (1) the truly needy, (2) ending waste and fraud, (3) the budget deficit, (4) the punitive tax system, (5) the excessive growth of government, (6) the evils of socialism, (7) dependency, (8) government's role in fighting poverty, (9) private sector initiatives, (10) traditional American values, (11) fairness, (12) the brotherhood of man and, (13) the rebirth of hope. This chapter deals separately with each of these themes, demonstrating how they contribute to a negative view of the poor, thus easing the Reagan administration's effort to enact policies which took from the poor and gave to the rich.

### 5.1. The Truly Needy

Our perception of the social world is largely determined by the available categories for organizing and understanding it. Linguistic categories attribute meaning and value to phenomena we observe or assume by relating them to preexisting cognitive patterns. Linguistic categories are often used by public officials to evoke feelings of sympathy for the existing social order and values while contributing to a negative image of social alternatives. In this sense they stimulate fear and hope which are crucial factors in the creation of public support or quiescence (see Section 4.2).

These categorizations take very subtle forms. Such is the case with the terms 'truly needy' or 'deserving poor' to characterize welfare recipients. This is the first predominant theme in Reagan's speeches. Rarely did he employ the term 'undeserving poor,' overtly stating that some of the poor are not truly needy. He did not have to, since the existence of the deserving poor, whose legitimate existence he repeatedly acknowledged, implies the existence of the non-deserving poor. The more often the notion of the deserving poor is emphasized (leaving the impression that Reagan was actually concerned about them), the greater the impression that there are others who claim public assistance without true need. Reagan conveyed the impression that there are very few truly needy. Therefore, most of the money spent

in welfare constituted waste and fraud.

In his State of the Union Address of January 26, 1982, Reagan stated:

"The entitlement programs that make up our safety net for the truly needy have worthy goals and many deserving recipients. We will protect them. But there's only one way to see to it that these programs really help those whom they were designed to help. And that is by bringing their spiraling costs under control."<sup>2</sup>

The message contains the reassurance to the public that a social safety net does and should exist for the deserving poor. The unspoken part of the message is that there are people who are not truly needy. The public is tacitly made to believe that despite the 'many deserving recipients' who merit government assistance there are many others who receive it illegitimately. Consequently, one can assume that benefits can be safely cut back. Listeners are made to believe that one can reduce the social safety net without hurting 'deserving recipients.' It further implies that the people should not "be fooled by those who proclaim that spending cuts will deprive the elderly, the needy and the helpless."<sup>3</sup> Rather, the public is made to believe that the economic program and the resulting welfare cuts of the Reagan administration "will protect the needy while it

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<sup>2</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.79

<sup>3</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.80

triggers a recovery that will benefit all Americans.\*

In the same State of the Union Address Reagan indicates he "signed a bill to reduce the growth of these programs [Medicare and Medicaid] by \$44 billion over the next three years while at the same time preserving essential services for the truly needy."<sup>5</sup> That \$44 billion in cuts does not hurt the truly needy implies there must be a considerable number of people who are undeserving and an unnecessary burden on the taxpayer.

Reagan is never explicit about how many of the poor are undeserving nor does he specify who is undeserving. He leaves that to his audience. Had he ever mentioned precisely who is undeserving, he would have created opposition from the 'undeserving.' Since the only ones he considered worthy of public support were the blind, the disabled, mothers with underage children and the elderly, one can conclude that all other recipients of public assistance are undeserving because they supposedly can sustain themselves. But since he was never explicit about who is undeserving, the individual welfare recipient's mind was put at ease that not he or she but 'the others' are undeserving. Simultaneously, potential for conflict is fired between welfare recipients and the rest of society.

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\* Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.80

<sup>5</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, pp.79n

The term 'undeserving poor' has an inherent racist dimension. Stereotypically, the overwhelming majority of the poor are perceived to be African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. In reality however, more than two-thirds of the population living below the poverty line is white.<sup>6</sup> Not only do racial minorities supposedly constitute the vast majority of the poor, additionally they are, in accordance with the American political culture, considered lazy, unmotivated and unwilling to work (see Section 3.3). Their unfortunate economic situation is attributed to their own failure. Since they could easily provide for themselves and improve their predicament, if they really wanted, one can conclude that they are undeserving and unworthy of public aid. One can go so far as to claim the undeserving poor are typically African-Americans or Mexican-Americans.

Reagan's overt silence about who is 'undeserving' might be a crucial feature of his interaction with the public. The structure of the unspoken parts of his message might allow the audience to reconstruct it in accordance with prevailing myths. This is consistent with the earlier assessment that public language builds on an implicit understanding between the speaker and the audience (see Section 4.2 on 'Political Language'). Cultural predispositions trigger the acceptance

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<sup>6</sup> As shown in Section 2.3 African-Americans and Mexican-Americans are disproportionately poor. However, they account for only about one third of the population living below the poverty line.

and 'right' interpretation of implicit meaning; in this case that the poor are undeserving. The notion that the undeserving poor are African-Americans and Mexican-Americans can thus easily be reconstructed by the public without Reagan ever being explicit about it. As Edelman points out, politicians' statements "are often either impossible to verify or quite clearly invalid ... As influences on political opinion, however, their verifiability is less important than their availability."

All in all, the split of the poor into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' made it easy for large parts of the public to be in favor of welfare cuts. On the one hand, the consciences of those concerned about cuts are reassured that the 'truly needy' are still helped. On the other hand, it reinforced the stereotype of the undeserving poor making it a worthy goal to favor welfare cuts in the name of ousting waste and fraud.

### 5.2. Ending Waste and Fraud

"Contrary to some of the wild charges you may have heard, this administration has not and will not turn its back on America's elderly or America's poor. Under the new budget, funding for social insurance programs will be more than double the amount spent only 6 years ago. But it would be foolish to pretend that these or any programs cannot be made more efficient and economical...

Committee after committee of this Congress has heard witness after witness describe many of these programs

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<sup>7</sup> Edelman 1977, p.30

as poorly administered and rife with waste and fraud. Virtually every American who shops in a local supermarket is aware of the daily abuses that take place in the food stamp program, which has grown by 16,000 percent in the last 15 years. Another example is Medicare and Medicaid - programs with worthy goals but whose costs have increased from 11.2 billion to almost 60 billion, more than 5 times as much, in just 10 years.

Waste and fraud are serious problems. Back in 1980, Federal investigators testified before one of our committees that 'corruption has permeated virtually every area of the Medicare and Medicaid industry.' One official said many of the people who are cheating the system were 'very confident that nothing was going to happen to them.' Well, something is going to happen. Not only the taxpayers are defrauded; the people with real dependency on these programs are deprived of what they need, because available resources are going not to the needy but to the greedy.

The time has come to control the uncontrollable. In August we made a start. I signed a bill to reduce the growth of these programs by \$44 billion over the next three years while at the same time preserving essential services for the truly needy."<sup>8</sup>

References to illegitimate spending are common in Reagan speeches. Phrases like "Virtually every American who shops in a local supermarket is aware of the daily abuses that take place in the food stamp program"<sup>9</sup> and "corruption has permeated virtually every area of the Medicare and Medicaid health care industry"<sup>10</sup> stimulate public sentiments against the poor. In a subliminal way, the poor are characterized as crooked. Edelman's assertion that public language demonstrates "implicit understanding between speaker and

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<sup>8</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, pp.79n

<sup>9</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.79

<sup>10</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.79

audience" bears validity in this case (see the discussion about formal and public language in Section 4.2).

Based in the assumption that most anti-poverty programs are subject to waste and fraud, the clear conclusion is that it is possible and necessary to "cut more nonessential Government spending and root out more waste" because taxpayers are the victims of 'Big Government,' liberal politicians and millions of welfare cheats who live at their expense.<sup>11</sup>

"Our standard here [in cutting welfare] will be fairness, ensuring that the taxpayers' hard-earned dollars go only to the truly needy; that none of them are turned away, but that fraud and waste are stamped out. And I'm sorry to say, there's a lot of it out there. In the food stamp program alone, last year, we identified almost \$1.1 billion in overpayments. The taxpayers aren't the only victims of this kind of abuse. The truly needy suffer as funds intended for them are taken not by the needy, but by the greedy. For everyone's sake, we must put an end to such waste and corruption."<sup>12</sup>

It appears favoring welfare cuts is a moral obligation for every good American.

### 5.3. The Budget Deficit

The preceding pages have revealed how Reagan evoked the portrait of the undeserving poor, thus making it easy for the public to believe that most of the money spent on

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<sup>11</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.79

<sup>12</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984, pp.82n

welfare constitutes waste and fraud. Another prominent theme was the need to reduce the federal deficit. According to Reagan, it was a result of 'uncontrollable' domestic spending on 'illegitimate' anti-poverty programs.

"Let's be clear about where the deficit problem comes from. Contrary to the drumbeat we've been hearing for the last few months, the deficits we face are not rooted in defense spending...

The fact is, our deficits come from the uncontrolled growth of the budget for domestic spending...

I will ask the Congress to adopt specific measures to control the growth of the so-called uncontrollable spending programs. These are the automatic spending programs, such as food stamps, that cannot be simply frozen and that have grown by over 400 percent since 1970. They are the largest single cause of the built-in or structural deficit problem."<sup>13</sup>

In his Budget Message on February 5, 1986, Reagan labeled the federal deficit "a major threat looming on the horizon ... If the deficit is not brought under control, we risk losing all we've achieved - and more."<sup>14</sup> The budget deficit is portrayed as a crisis which threatens all that society has accomplished. Edelman demonstrates that the identification of crises calling for governmental action is politically useful for the powerful: The poor usually bear a disproportionate burden in paying for the effects of crises while the economically and politically powerful benefit from

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<sup>13</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984, pp.82n

<sup>14</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987b, p.53

them.<sup>15</sup>

Reagan held that the budget crisis the nation faced was not the responsibility of his administration. Rather, it was "the inheritance of decades of tax and tax and spend and spend."<sup>16</sup> He claims: "The problems we inherited were far worse than most inside and out of government had expected."<sup>17</sup> But his administration 'certainly' deals with this threat by "cutting unnecessary Federal spending and improve management of necessary programs."<sup>18</sup> Reagan assured the concerned public that "the appropriate way to deal with the deficit [is to] cut excessive Federal spending rather than attack the family budget by increasing taxes..."<sup>19</sup> The effort to consolidate the national finances, according to Reagan, "asks for some sacrifice by all ... but it imposes an undue burden on none."<sup>20</sup> In reality, spending for anti-poverty programs was reduced while the rich enjoyed radical reductions in their income and capital gains taxes. In this sense, the budget crisis was, in accordance with Edelman's theoretical findings, employed as a rhetorical tool to veil

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<sup>15</sup> Edelman 1977, p.44

<sup>16</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.77

<sup>17</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984, p.81

<sup>18</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987b, p.54

<sup>19</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987b, p.54

<sup>20</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984, p.80

the shift of wealth from the poor to the rich in the Eighties (see Table 2.1 'Growing Income Inequality').

Reagan uses several rhetorical devices, among them lies and conscious misinformation, to portray the federal deficit as the result of unnecessary welfare spending. First of all, Reagan assures the public that "the deficits we face are not rooted in defense spending."<sup>21</sup> He did not mention that the annual budget deficit in the 1980s approximated the annual military outlays, or to put it differently, without a military there would have been no budget deficit. Second, Reagan permanently stressed that taxes can not be raised to reduce the deficit because this would take away "capital needed for business and industrial expansion."<sup>22</sup> He reassured the public that the budget would not be balanced "on the backs of the American taxpayers."<sup>23</sup> In fact, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, the poor and the middle-class had to pay for the side-effects of Reaganomics. Third, entitlement programs for the poor were skyrocketing according to Reagan.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, "the time has come to

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<sup>21</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984, p.82

<sup>22</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1985b, p.88

<sup>23</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.78

<sup>24</sup> Reagan did not mention that the expanding welfare rolls of the 1970s reflected the gradual expansion of government aid to millions who lived below the government's own poverty line, but who had been excluded from assistance previously.

control the uncontrollable.<sup>25</sup>

Despite all the trouble with the deficit, Reagan had to put the public's mind at ease that his administration could handle the crisis. He assured the public: "The policies we have in place will reduce the deficit steadily, surely and, in time, completely."<sup>26</sup> Such a reassurance does not only signify that his administration is able to cope with the present crisis but also that the policies the administration has enacted are sound and that they serve worthy goals, viz. the reduction, and possibly elimination of the budget deficit. This traces public attention away from the fact that most of the budget consolidation policies enacted, particularly the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, were extremely burdensome for the poor.

In the end, the rhetorically created budget crisis had two major effects of the public's perception of the poor. First, the poor were labeled responsible for the budget crisis because the cheats claimed public assistance without being in true need. Second, cutbacks in anti-poverty programs seemed an appropriate means to reduce the budget deficit. So to speak, the poor were tacitly characterized as an 'out-group,' defined in terms of inferior moral quality and standing in conflict with the rest of society. The in-

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<sup>25</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.79

<sup>26</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.78

group, those who are economically successful, supposedly have higher moral standards than the poor (see Section 4.2 which addresses the rhetorical devices employed by political leaders to blind the public about the complexity of the social world).

This finding backs the earlier insight that Reagan's rhetoric drove a wedge between the non-working poor and the rest of society. It further suggests that the public might have considered welfare recipients a financial and, eventually, a social burden which endangers the stability of the national economy and subsequently the orderly functioning of the American political system.

#### 5.4. The Punitive Tax System

"The taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate purposes. It must not be used to regulate the economy or bring about social change. We've tried that, and surely we must be able to see it doesn't work."<sup>27</sup>

After noting that in the five years before he took office "Federal taxes for the average family increased 67 percent," Reagan concludes that "we can no longer procrastinate and hope that things will get better."<sup>28</sup> He stresses the necessity to limit spending for social programs because: "The fact is, our deficits come from the uncontrolled growth

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<sup>27</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982b, p.223

<sup>28</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982b, p.215

of the budget for domestic spending."<sup>29</sup> The growing deficit can not be controlled by raising taxes since "simple fairness dictates that government must not raise taxes on families struggling to pay their bills."<sup>30</sup>

This short characterization of Reagan's rhetorical association between supposedly illegitimate government anti-poverty programs and the ordinary citizen's tax burden shows that parts of the general public, particularly the middle-class and the working poor ('families struggling to pay for their bills'), are consciously described as victims of a tax system that reduces the "reward for hard work, thrift, and risk-taking."<sup>31</sup> This means, Reagan simply linked the individual's taxes to anti-poverty programs "rife with waste and fraud," serving a non-deserving constituency.<sup>32</sup>

The consequences for the public's perception of the poor are clear. The middle-class and the working poor regard themselves in an adversarial position with the non-working poor. As Reagan puts it: "The production of America is the possession of those who serve, create and produce,"<sup>33</sup> thereby implying that those who can not, or do not want to

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<sup>29</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984, p.82

<sup>30</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1985b, p.88

<sup>31</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1985b, p.85

<sup>32</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.79

<sup>33</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982b, p.223

'serve, create and produce' are unworthy. Social dividing lines are shifted from the conflict between rich and poor to those who pay taxes and those who do not. The upper-class, middle-class and working poor must fight a common 'enemy,' the nonworking poor. The fact that the Reagan administration shifted wealth from the lower- and middle-classes to the rich was hidden by Reagan's rhetoric.

#### 5.5. The Excessive Growth of Government

"Some Federal programs have become overextended, misdirected, or operate on too expensive a scale given the current tight budgetary environment. This budget proposes reforms to limit the costs and future growth of medicare and medicaid, subsidized housing, Civil Service pensions and health benefits ... and many other programs.<sup>34</sup>

Government, Reagan argues, grew 'beyond the consent of the governed' and interfered in too many private affairs over the past twenty to thirty years. Thus, "it is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from the unnecessary and excessive growth of government."<sup>35</sup> He goes on: "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987b, p.55

<sup>35</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982a, p.140

<sup>36</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982a, p.139

It was argued earlier that Americans historically have objections against 'Big Government' because they are made to believe that all government intrusion into private or economic affairs limits the freedom of the individual. At the same time they are inclined to ignore the positive role government can play to the redistribution of wealth.

Reagan fortified the impression of government intervening into too many realms of life and endangering the seemingly smooth functioning of the American political and economic systems. He claims: "We have created a welfare monster" on which "more than \$132 billion was spent in 1985."<sup>37</sup> Thus, the time has come "to reform this outmoded social dinosaur."<sup>38</sup> The metaphors of monsters and dinosaurs speak for themselves. They create value premises which do not necessarily reflect reality (see Section 4.2 on the role of metaphors in political mythologies). Government, it seems, is outmoded, obscure, intrusive and dangerous. It appears to be a threat for the common weal; particularly if it acts on behalf of the poor. Therefore, the tasks and the scope of government should be reduced.

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<sup>37</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1988b, p.112

<sup>38</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1988b, p.112

### 5.6. The Evils of Socialism

The reasons for limited government were articulated by Reagan in a variety of ways. He stressed the benefits that result from unlimited business activities and the repression that results from socialist or communist forms of government. 'Big Government,' according to Reagan, is nothing but an attempt to punish individual initiatives and rewards those not willing to work, or those who do not want to take risks. As Reagan points out: "The future belongs not to governments and ideologies which oppress their peoples, but to democratic systems of self-government which encourage individual initiative and guarantee personal freedom."<sup>39</sup>

The portrayal of America as being the bearer of all which is worthwhile is another example of the rhetorical creation of an in-group as discussed in Section 4.2. It defines the outer world, socialist governments in this case, in imprecise terms leaving the impression that everything not in accordance with 'American values' is a threat. Many people are prone to accept such rhetoric since it fits neatly the notions conveyed by the American political culture (see Section 4.1 on the acceptance of political myths).

Portraying socialism as a form of government, which is totally adverse to all those values which are considered

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<sup>39</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984, p.87

worthy in America, serves a double purpose. On the one hand, an outside enemy and supposedly a threat for the American way of life is created. This makes it easier for politicians to gain public support for high military spending, thereby demonstrating to the people that limitations in anti-poverty programs are necessary in order to preserve 'our way of life.' On the other hand, government intervention into economic and social affairs is discredited by portraying the failures of Soviet-style communism. The subliminal message is the Federal Government should not interfere in the redistribution of wealth because this is considered harmful to the interests of the American society. Put differently, redistributive policies remind people of socialist practices which are totally discredited in America.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The following excerpts of Reagan's 1987 State of the Union Address reveal how he masterly linked international to domestic issues. He highlighted problems current socialist governments are afflicted with in order to discredit redistributive policies in the United States:

"Since 1970 the Soviets have invested \$500 billion more in their military forces than we have. Even today, though nearly one in three Soviet families is without running hot water...

This year we celebrate the second century of our Constitution. The Sandinistas just signed theirs two weeks ago, and then suspended it...

Now from foreign borders, let us return to our own, because America in the world is only as strong as America at home...

We've had great success in restoring our economic integrity, and we've rescued our nation from the worst economic mess since the depression. But there's more to do. For starters, the federal deficit is outrageous. For years, I've asked that we stop pushing onto our children the excesses of our government...

We've created a welfare monster that is a shocking

Ever since the anti-poverty programs of the Sixties, conservatives have claimed that the programs were not primarily intended to alleviate the situation of the poor. Rather, they asserted these programs are part of the liberals broader strategy to move America towards clientelism and socialism. The tax system plays, according to conservatives, a critical role in these efforts as it can be used either to foster free market mechanisms (which the conservatives appreciate), or to steer the economy and redistribute wealth. In his speech on Economic Recovery of February 18, 1981, Reagan held: "The taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes. It must not be used to provide revenues to regulate the economy or bring about social change."<sup>41</sup> Since Reagan, along with other conservatives, rejects the idea of government intervention in the economy and social change brought about through government programs, he conveys that past money spent on government anti-poverty programs is illegitimate and 'ideologically impure.'

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indictment of our sense of priorities...

This is the time to reform this outmoded social dinosaur and finally break the poverty trap. Now, we will never abandon those who, through no fault of their own, must have our help. But let us work to see how many can be freed from the dependency of welfare and made self-supporting, which the great majority of welfare recipients want more than anything else." (Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1988b, pp.110-113)

<sup>41</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982b, p.223

Bringing anti-poverty programs in close proximity of socialist ideas has a double effect on the poor. First, anti-poverty policies might be rejected for ideological reasons. That is to say, even if government spending for the poor is considered a worthy goal, the overall effect of it (slide towards socialism) is so dangerous as to override the foregoing good. This makes it more acceptable for the public to limit spending for the poor. Second, the poor might be considered 'Unamerican' because they do rely on resources provided by those who work. Such behavior is adversary to the American ideal of self-sufficiency.

#### 5.7. Dependency

"Let us resolve that we will stop spreading dependency and start spreading opportunity; that we will stop spreading bondage and start spreading freedom."<sup>42</sup>

Reagan holds that "many people today are economically trapped in welfare" and "they just don't know how to free themselves from that welfare security blanket."<sup>43</sup> This symbolizes that the welfare system itself is, if one believes Reagan, harmful to the interests of the poor; it traps them in dependency. He cites the example of a California mother who made her way out of dependency:

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<sup>42</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1986b, p.111

<sup>43</sup> Reagan in Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 1981, p.1081

"After we undertook our welfare reforms in California, I received a letter from a woman with several children who had been on Aid to [Families With] Dependent Children. She wrote that she had become so dependent on the welfare check that she even turned down offers of marriage. She just could not give up that security blanket that it represented. But she said that she'd always known that it couldn't go on, couldn't last forever. So when our reforms began, she just assumed that the time had come and that somehow she would be off welfare. She took her children and the \$600 she had saved from her, as she put it, so-called 'poverty,' and went to Alaska, where she had relatives. And as she was writing the letter now not to complain about our reforms, but to tell me that she had a good job and that working now had given her a great deal of self-respect, for which she thanked me, and then one line that I'll never forget. She said, 'It sure beats daytime-television.'"<sup>44</sup>

This example symbolizes Reagan's view that welfare recipients generally do not want to work. The welfare provisions they receive reinforce ('she had become so dependent') their deceitful attitudes towards work. Thus, welfare recipients have to be forced off welfare to become self-sufficient (see Section 3.4 for the culturalist interpretation of poverty).

Once again, it seems to be a moral obligation to advocate welfare cuts. Reduced provisions supposedly are the only means to activate the welfare recipients motivation to work. The idea that welfare creates dependency highly coincides with the American political culture which regards poverty as individual failure. In this sense, welfare prolongs poverty

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<sup>44</sup> Reagan in Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 1981, p.1081

because the poor lack the negative incentives to become self-sufficient.

#### 5.8. Government's Role in Fighting Poverty

"In all my years as Governor, and now as President, I have never found an agency, a program, a piece of legislation, or a budget that was adequate to meet the total need of human beings."<sup>45</sup>

Reagan, in accordance with the 'culturalist' interpretation of poverty, assumes that poverty is caused and perpetuated by the personal and moral deficiencies of the poor. Consequently, the solution to overcome poverty is through changing the attitudes and patterns of behavior of the poor. Thus, the government can not and should not do anything to support the poor materially. The best thing government can do, according to the cultural interpretation of poverty, is to do nothing. Since a complete withdrawal of government from social policies is currently not possible, Reagan suggests as great a limitation in government responsibilities for the poor (and other social groups) as possible. The free play of social and economic forces should, according to him, determine interactions between individuals and businesses.

"Traditionally, governments supply the type of needed services that would not be provided by the private

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<sup>45</sup> Reagan in Weekly Compilations of Presidential Documents 1981, p.1081

marketplace. Over the years, however, the Federal Government has acquired many commercial-type operations. In most cases, it would be better for the Government to get out of the business and stop competing with the private sector."<sup>46</sup>

Reagan repeatedly named four reasons to delegitimize public spending for the poor as much as possible. First he argues that government spending does not benefit the poor since it reinforces their inherent inadequacies (cf. Section 5.1). Second, government anti-poverty programs are portrayed as being relatively inefficient and 'rife with waste and fraud' (cf. Section 5.2). Third, supposedly they create dependency (cf. section 5.7). Forth, he holds that private philanthropy should at least partly replace public welfare spending. He considered it more effective, efficacious, and humane than government anti-poverty programs.

#### 5.9. Private Sector Initiatives

"We all know countless stories of individual and personal generosity. There was an incident in Los Angeles a couple of years ago involving a man named José Salcido, whose wife had died of cancer, leaving him both father and mother of 13 children. In an accident only the Lord can explain, one day the brakes of his truck didn't hold and he was crushed against a brick wall as he walked in front of his vehicle. The children who had lost their mother had now lost their father. But they were not orphaned by their neighbors or even complete strangers, who immediately began collecting contributions. The parish church started a drive. Finally, a fund was set up at the bank and a committee was formed of citizens to take care of it. They also discovered how kind the people of this land

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<sup>46</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987b, pp.55n

can be.

One letter accompanying a check said it all: 'This is for the children of José Salcido. It is for them to know there are always others who care; that despite personal tragedy, the world is not always the dark place it seems to be; that their father would have wanted for them to go on with courage and strength and still open hearts.

Now, I know there are cynics who dismiss the notion of Americans helping other Americans. They say that I speak of an America that never was and that never can be. They believe voluntarism is a mushy idea, the product of mushy thinking. They say that our society today is too complex or that we're trying to repeal the 20th century.

Well, the cynics who say these things have been too busy increasing Washington's power that they've lost sight of America ... The spirit is not dead."<sup>47</sup>

In his State of the Union Address of January 27, 1986, Reagan reported to the public that private associations such as churches, schools or business "are almost invariably far more efficient than government in running social programs."<sup>48</sup> In another speech Reagan gave to the National Alliance of Business he stated:

"Over our history, Americans have always extended their hands in gestures of assistance. They helped build a neighbor's barn when it burned down, and then formed a volunteer fire department so it wouldn't burn down again. They harvested the next fellow's crop when he was injured or ill, and they raised school funds at quilting bees and church socials."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Reagan in Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 1981, p.1083

<sup>48</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.82

<sup>49</sup> Reagan in Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 1981, p.1082

In the same speech he pointed out the "marvelous work McDonald's is doing with its Ronald McDonald Houses."<sup>50</sup> Reagan portrays an idealized community with little structural trouble. The 'culturalist' Reagan denies that private initiatives are often the response to structural problems.

The idea that private sector initiatives are more effective and desirable than government programs is part of the American political culture. The individual or the business which is least influenced by the government is, if this logic is true, most successful. As Reagan puts it: "The private sector still offers creative, less expensive, and more efficient alternatives to solving our social problems."<sup>51</sup> In the same context Reagan referred to the publicly appealing idea that his trust in private business equals his faith in the American people.

"Our faith in the American people is reflected in another major endeavor. Our Private Sector Initiatives Task Force is seeking out successful community models of school, church, business, union, foundation, and civic programs that help community needs. Such groups are almost invariably far more efficient than government in running social programs."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Reagan in Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 1981, p.1084

<sup>51</sup> Reagan in Weekly Compilations of Presidential Documents 1981, p.1082

<sup>52</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1983, p.82

However, there is no necessary and logical connection between 'faith in the American people' and boundless economic activities. Nevertheless, Reagan repeatedly suggested this link in his public speeches to discredit redistributive functions the government could take and to stimulate support for a further deregulation of private businesses. Both turned out to be disadvantageous for the poor.

#### 5.10. Traditional American Values

"Now, there is another great heritage to speak of this evening. Of all the changes that have swept America the past four years, none brings greater promise than our rediscovery of the values of faith, freedom, family, work, and neighborhood.

We see signs of renewal in increased attendance in places of worship; renewed optimism and faith in our future; love of country rediscovered by our young, who are leading the way."<sup>53</sup>

'Culturalists' like Reagan praise the virtue of family life and traditional values such as work, nation, faith and family. In his State of the Union Address of February 4, 1986, Reagan pointed out: "And despite the pressures of our modern world, family and community remain the moral core of our society, guardians of our values and hopes for the future. Family and community are the casters of this Great American Comeback."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1986b, p.113

<sup>54</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987a, p.42

The American political culture ascribes superior moral and mental characteristics to the economically successful as compared to the poor. On top of lacking the superior traits of the rich, the poor supposedly lack the traditional values Reagan permanently praised: Faith, freedom, family, work, and neighborhood. Were they to internalize and honor these values, they would be better off. As Reagan claimed: "In the welfare culture, the breakdown of the family, the most basic support system, has reached crisis proportions."<sup>55</sup> His repeated praise of the family and the nation as the essential objects of identification creates the image that all those who can not or do not want to share these values are at the margins of this society.

The internalization of traditional American values by the majority of the population of this country (and the reinforcement of these values through Reagan) sets rigid 'moral' standards for the public evaluation of behavior and life-style of groups which are not mainstream. Deviations from mainstream America, such as poverty, are traced back to the apparent lack of solid and guiding principles; maybe to the absence of morals.

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<sup>55</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1987a, p.45

### 5.11. Fairness

In his first Inaugural Address on January 20, 1981, Reagan claimed: "With the idealism and fair play which are at the core of our system and our strength, we can have a strong and prosperous America at peace with itself and the world."<sup>56</sup> Inherent in this society and therefore in this form of government, Reagan assumes, are idealism and fair play. Thus, whatever one accomplishes or whenever one fails, it is seen as the direct result of the individual's action, i.e., the political and economic systems are considered to give equal chances, and not only equal rights, to everyone. This widely accepted and historically grown ideology is inherently racist and sexist because it disregards the structural disadvantages faced by minorities and women in the economic and political systems.

Reagan campaigned and governed under the ticket of fairness. While eliminating federal spending for social programs, he asserted, the proclaimed standard "will be fairness ensuring that the taxpayers hard-earned dollars go only to the truly needy."<sup>57</sup> Statements like this further racism in a very subliminal way: The undeserving poor are stereotypically African-Americans and Mexican-Americans who take advantage of the predominantly white working population

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<sup>56</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982a, p.140

<sup>57</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1984b, p.83

(see Section 5.1). Reagan accomplishes his end to portray racial minorities as illegitimately claiming government aid, like in many other cases, without being explicit about it (see Section 4.2).

As indicated in Section 3.1, the narrow, largely legalistic egalitarian theme pervading the American political culture constitutes a two-sided sword which can be employed either in favor of or against redistributive policies. Reagan clearly defined equality in terms of equality before the law. He assumed and rhetorically emphasized that formal rather than material equality is what Americans really want. Since the notion of equality is linked to the concepts of fairness and justice, it was relatively easy to characterize welfare programs as inherently unjust and unfair. One can conclude that the notion of equality, as defined in Reagan's terms, was a powerful instrument to mobilize public resentment against anti-poverty spending in the name of justice and fairness.

Questioning the fairness of anti-poverty programs (and implicitly the honesty of those on welfare) adds another 'moral' dimension to the attack against the poor. In accordance with other themes, the public is made to believe it is morally deceitful to claim welfare; it is thus a moral obligation for every 'good American' to support the government's efforts in cutting welfare.

### 5.12. The Brotherhood of Man

"As an older American, I remember a time when people of different race, creed, or ethnic origin in our land found hatred and prejudice in social custom and, yes, in law. There is no story more heartening in our history than the progress we have made toward the brotherhood of man that God intended for us. Let us resolve there will be no turning back or hesitation on the road to an America rich in dignity and abundant with opportunity for all our citizens."<sup>58</sup>

The use of phrases like "There is no story more heartening in our history than the progress we have made toward the brotherhood of man" plays down the extent of racism that still exists. Additionally, such phrases convey that all people in this country have equal opportunities and do not face disadvantages based on the color of their skin. It lets Americans off the moral hook which underpins collective efforts to compensate for past wrongs. Consequently, the listeners of Reagan's speeches are tacitly made to believe that the disproportionally high poverty rate among non-whites is not caused by racism but by innate deficiencies of them. In accordance with the cultural explanation of poverty the bad economic condition of non-whites is rather attributed to their assumed innate ineptitude.

Reagan's referral to "the brotherhood of man God intended

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<sup>58</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1986a, p.44

for us<sup>59</sup> implies that ending racism is a purely private matter. There is no empirical measure that can confirm or disconfirm progress towards the goal of ending racism. Furthermore, all measures the government could take to fight racism are tacitly defined worthless since God and not the government provides the means to end racism. The containment of racism in the private realm decreases its importance as a public issue and frees government from its responsibility to act in favor of racial minorities which are discriminated against.

Reagan further claims that this is "a society bursting with opportunities, reaching for its future with confidence, sustained by faith, fair play, and a conviction that good and courageous people will flourish when they're free."<sup>60</sup> The notion of the inherent fairness of the American social and economic systems (as discussed in Section 5.11) is stressed by rejecting racism as a major factor influencing the adverse economic situation of non-Whites. Simultaneously, deep rooted prejudices and stereotypes are revived. In this sense, the rhetorical denial of the existence of racism is itself inherently racist. There is no other way left to explain the disproportional poverty rate among non-whites in terms of moral, mental or biological

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<sup>59</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1986a, p.44

<sup>60</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1985b, p.92

inadequacies.

Reagan repeatedly misinterpreted historical realities by defining the prosperity of America as a result of the unleashed energy of all people rather than in terms of continued and systematic exploitation of non-whites for the benefit of the white middle and upper classes. He asserted:

"If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever be done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth."<sup>61</sup>

Not only the discrimination against non-whites but also the discrimination against women was played down by Reagan. In the cases where the ongoing discrimination against women was undeniable he reassured the public that he will head the struggle for justice.

"Our commitment to fairness means that we must assure legal and economic equality for women, and eliminate, once and for all, all traces of unjust discrimination from the United States code. We will not tolerate wage discrimination based on sex."

In fact, the wage gap between women and men persisted during the Eighties (cf. Section 2.3. on 'Growing Racism, Sexism, and Economic Inequality in the Eighties'). No matter what the reality is, Reagan portrayed a mythical America in

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<sup>61</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1982a, p.140

which racism and sexism are absent. Addressing the public from a presidential position, he gave additional validity to what everybody wanted to believe. As discussed in Section 4.1 people tend to be more receptive to myths if they match deeply held beliefs.

Generally speaking, Reagan's rhetoric about the brotherhood of all Americans, no matter what their race, national origin, or sex, distracted from the increasing injustices towards the disadvantaged by portraying the American social and economic systems as inherently fair. Hence, praising a brotherhood of man which in fact does not exist, subliminally enhances racist and sexist explanations of poverty, defining poverty in terms of individual ineptitude.

### 5.13. The Rebirth of Hope

"Tonight, we can report and be proud of one of the best recoveries in decades. Send away the handwringers and Thomases. Hope is reborn for couples dreaming of owning homes and for risk-takers with vision to create tomorrows opportunities.

The spirit of enterprise is sparked by the sunrise industries of high-tech and small-businesspeople with big ideas - people like Barbara Proctor, who rose from a ghetto to build a multimillion-dollar advertising agency in Chicago; Carlos Perez, a Cuban refugee, who turned \$27 and a dream into a successful importing business in Coral Gables, Florida.

People like these are the heroes of the eighties."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1985b, p.86

The publicly appealing ideas that a ghetto child built a multi-million dollar advertising agency or that a Cuban refugee (note that this person left a socialist country and made his way up in America!) turned '\$27 and a dream' into a business, fails to take into consideration the fact that most of the poor do not have a real chance to make their way out of poverty. However, hope transcends the constraints of the present and projects a better future, thus ignoring the necessity to help the most deprived now.

"We can ensure steady economic growth. We can develop America's next frontier. We can strengthen our traditional values. And we can build a meaningful peace to protect our loved ones and this shining star of faith that has guided millions from tyranny to the safe harbor of freedom, progress, and hope.

Doing these things will open wider gates of opportunity, provide greater security for all, with no barriers of bigotry or discrimination."<sup>63</sup>

Hope is a major theme in Reagan's rhetoric. Hope as a political instrument is afflicted with problems. It points towards tomorrow without taking the difficulties of today into consideration; it is emotional rather than rational.

The hope for a better tomorrow makes it easier to oversee that the problems of the future are created in the present. The political instrument hope might thus blind the people about measures that should be taken in the present to build a secure future.

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<sup>63</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1985b, p.87

"Well, you can bet [happiness is] rising because, my fellow citizens, America isn't finished. Her best days have just begun.  
Thank you, God bless you, and God bless America."<sup>64</sup>

### 5.13. Conclusions

At this point some conclusions regarding the 'true' message of Reagan's rhetoric against the poor, particularly the non-working poor, can be drawn. Reagan's rhetoric successfully tapped long held American values and beliefs and reinforced myths about the poor which are rooted in and supported by the American political culture.

(1) The categorization of the poor into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' was a prerequisite to mobilize public support for welfare cuts. It evokes the impression that considerable numbers of welfare recipients live at the expense of society without being in true need. This negative impression is reinforced through other recurring elements in Reagan's rhetoric. Since the poor are stereotypically African-Americans or Mexican-Americans, the undeserving poor are typically considered racial minorities. This adds a subliminal but powerful racist dimension to the notion of the 'undeserving poor.'

(2) Since large proportions of those drawing welfare are considered undeserving, one can conclude most of the resources spent for public assistance to the poor are

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<sup>64</sup> Reagan in Congressional Quarterly 1988b, p.115

subject to waste and fraud. It appears to be a moral obligation to oust waste and fraud (i.e. to cut the undeserving from the welfare rolls) in order to ensure that those in true need can be further provided with provisions.

(3) In addition to the increased tax burden of the individual, the nation faces a budget crisis which is supposedly created by those who claim public assistance without being in true need. Since the non-working poor were held accountable for the financial crisis, it was easily justifiable to make them pay a disproportionate share (through reduced benefits) for the consolidation of the national finances.

(4) Portraying the taxpayers as victims of an overexpanded welfare net creates negative sentiments against welfare recipients because each and every person paying taxes actually regards himself or herself as being economically hurt by those who are on welfare. The taxpayers might thus regard the current political and economic systems as inherently sound; it is just the tax system that is considered unfair since it supposedly serves the interests of self-proclaimed liberals, social utopians and those who do not want to work.

(5) Reagan portrays the government as having excessively grown during the Sixties and Seventies; mainly due to the enactment of illegitimate welfare programs. Thus, 'Big Government' might be regarded as the advocate of an

undeserving non-working constituency living off welfare.

(6) Reagan links redistributive policies in the United States to socialism. Since many Americans have, due to their adherence to individualistic materialism, strong objections against socialism, anti-poverty programs might stimulate the fear of socialist infiltration. Thus, government anti-poverty programs might be rejected for ideological reasons.

(7) Another theme is dependency created through welfare provisions. Since the poor are considered morally deficient and parasitic, public support traps them in, rather than frees them from, poverty. Thus follows that ...

(8) Government should not intervene on behalf of the poor. This will just prolong poverty by creating dependency. Additionally, government programs are considered to be rife with fraud and relatively ineffective.

(9) Private benevolence is delineated as being more efficient and more efficacious than government anti-poverty programs. It is assumed those who are in true need are cared for sufficiently through private initiatives and with much lesser government assistance.

(10) The poor supposedly lack adherence to traditional American values, such as family, faith, neighborhood, and work. Were they to internalize them, they could free themselves from poverty and become part of the affluent mainstream America.

(11) Doubts about the fairness of anti-poverty programs

are implied in almost all themes Reagan employed. He repeatedly emphasizes that it is unfair to live off means provided by others. Once again, it seems to be a moral obligation to stand against the abuse of government provisions by the poor. Stronger still, simple fairness dictates the reduction or elimination of inherently unfair welfare programs.

(12) Reagan permanently claimed that racism is not a problem anymore. However, the denial of racism as a major cause for the adverse economic situation of non-White Americans is itself inherently racist. It triggers the impression that the economic condition of non-Whites is caused by innate ineptitude rather than biased social or economic structures.

(13) Hope is a recurring theme in Reagan's speeches. It transcends the problems and constraints of the present by portraying a bright future. Hope as a political instrument implicitly distracts from the necessity to act in the present in order to build a better future. The public's mind is put at ease that poverty will be overcome some day. Thus, hope suggests that there is no need to act on behalf of the poor now.

One can conclude that the rhetorical differentiation of the poor into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' was a prerequisite to gain public support for policies which worked against the poor and in favor of the rich.

Reagan's rhetorical attack on the welfare state should not be seen as isolated from the broader spectrum of rhetoric and policies favoring the haves at the expense of the have-nots. It marks part of the neoconservative strategy to reverse the political liberalism and the welfare state of the Sixties and Seventies and to re-establish a more tradition-bound society with decreased costs for legitimizing the political and economic systems. In this sense, Reagan's rhetoric and his policies were a renewed attempt to erect a socio-economic order serving the interests of an aristocratic business-class at the expense of the vast majority of Americans.

One last question suggests itself: What did the public think of the poor, racial minorities, and government intervention on their behalf during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s? The answer to this question helps in explaining why there was no widespread resistance against the massive redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich in the 1980s.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE RECEPTIVE PUBLIC

Any study about the political effect of rhetoric would be incomplete without an examination of the public opinion. Approval or rejection of pursued or proposed public policies are measures of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the government. V.O. Key elaborates different forms of consensus which possibly exist between political leaders and the public. Most crucial for this thesis is the notion of 'supportive consensus.' A supportive consensus means that "in some situations the function of opinion consensus is to support existing policy and detailed action taken in accord with that policy."<sup>1</sup> This does not exclude dissent towards government policies in one way or another, but it means that the actions taken by the government "are underpinned by opinion distributions that are functionally supportive."<sup>2</sup> If one can indeed find a supportive consensus among the American people towards Reagan's social policies one can explain the absence of a crisis of confidence resulting from the increasing disparity of wealth in the United States during the Eighties.

I will address the American public's continued faith in the American Dream as well as the continuity and change in

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<sup>1</sup> Key 1961, p.29

<sup>2</sup> Key 1961, p.30

American public opinion in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s towards the poor, racial minorities, and government intervention on their behalf. This will be supplemented by other measures of support for Reagan: The public's approval ratings and his electoral victories. These data demonstrate how the American public supported Reagan's efforts to cut assistance for the poor, thus preventing a crisis of confidence.

Polls by their very nature are imperfect measures of public opinion. The meaning of survey questions can vary over time and from one individual to the next, even if the semantical structure remains the same. The meaning of the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' in ideological self-identification questions is one such example.<sup>3</sup> On top of this, questions sometimes generate answers; that is to say, respondents often give answers without ever having thought about them. Notwithstanding these problems, polls are appropriate to detect the general mood of the public and for tapping broad themes in the American political culture. In this sense they are adequate for the purposes of this study.

Caution will be used in the interpretation of poll data. There is no way to conclusively determine whether or not Reagan's rhetoric had its intended impact on the public opinion. Nonetheless, one can demonstrate that there was a

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<sup>3</sup> see Barnes et al. 1979, Chapters 7 and 8

symbiotic relationship between Reagan's rhetoric and public opinion in which both reflect presumptions about poverty conveyed by the American political culture. Cultural suppositions made the public relatively receptive for Reagan's rhetoric which in turn reinforced stereotypes of the poor.

### 6.1. The Faith in the American Dream

Faith to the American Dream, that anyone and everybody can reach out to the highest aspirations is common to the American public. The acceptance of the American Dream has conservative policy implications.

In a major survey of American public opinion toward class, poverty and government obligation toward the poor conducted in 1973, Schlozman and Verba found that more than seven out of ten Americans believe that "Chances for the child of a factory worker to get ahead relative to those for the child of a business executive" are about the same or only somewhat less<sup>4</sup>. Almost seven out of ten Americans thought that hard work is the primary key to upward mobility.<sup>5</sup>

Polled in 1984, 60.1% of Americans agreed with the statement "Most people who don't get ahead should not blame

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<sup>4</sup> Schlozman and Verba 1979, p.107, Table 5.1

<sup>5</sup> Schlozman and Verba 1979, p.107, Table 5.1

the system; they have only themselves to blame." Only 28.6% disagreed.<sup>6</sup> The 1984 National Election Study found 51.9% of those sampled agreed that "If people work hard they almost always get what they want," 38.8% disagreed.<sup>7</sup>

A vast majority of Americans, Blacks and Whites alike, think that "Hard work is the most important factor in getting ahead." Seventy percent of Whites and 63% of Blacks think this way in the Schlozman and Verba study.<sup>8</sup> Even a majority of those respondents who are relatively disadvantaged by the American economic system (persons with a low occupational status) believe that hard work leads to success (59% of Blacks and 71% of Whites with a low occupational status think this way).<sup>9</sup> More striking, but in accordance with the American political culture, is that 40% of Blacks and Whites with a low occupational status believe that the chances for economic success are distributed fairly.<sup>10</sup> These myths, conveyed by the American Dream,

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<sup>6</sup> National Election Study (NES) 1986, p.112, Variable 205. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted.

<sup>7</sup> NES 1986, p.114, Variable 209. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted.

<sup>8</sup> Schlozman and Verba 1979, p.167

<sup>9</sup> Schlozman and Verba 1979, p.168, Figure 7.2

<sup>10</sup> Only Blacks with a high occupational status are relatively more skeptical than not about the fair distribution of chances for economic success. As little as 18% in this group think that the chances for economic success are distributed fairly. The corresponding number for

contribute to a relatively conservative orientation in American public opinion. They provide the basis for a 'supportive consensus' among the American public towards Reagan's policies which reduce assistance for the poor and minorities.

Public support for some types of government intervention which benefit a broad spectrum of the population has increased over the past twenty years. For example, the proportion of the public who believe that the Federal Government should support patients in paying for medical expenses rose from 45.2% in 1970 to 54.0% at the end of Reagan's presidency in 1989. The proportion of those who suggest that patients themselves should pay for medical services went down twenty-five percentage points from 40.0% in 1970 to 15.3% in 1989.<sup>11</sup> The same trend can be observed in the public's attitudes towards Social Security.<sup>12</sup> However, these trends do not reflect increased public support for the poor and racial minorities or programs assisting them. Many respondents favor increased spending for medical services or Social Security because they expect increased provisions for themselves.

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Whites with a high occupational status is 47% (Schlozman and Verba 1979, p.168, Figure 7.2).

<sup>11</sup> Abramson 1983, p.265, Table 15.1, Part B and NORC 1989, p.330, Q311

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson and Rogers 1986, pp.12nn

Though the public became more favorable towards social policies which benefit people generally, the opposite is true for programs targeted towards the poor and racial minorities as the following data will suggest.

### 6.2. Opinions Towards Programs Assisting the Poor

The continued faith in the American Dream plus individualistic and racist value orientations conveyed by the American political culture back the argument that a supportive consensus for the policies of president Reagan existed. Poll data show that the public was very resentful towards government aid for the poor during the Seventies and Eighties. In some respects it became even more resentful towards assistance for the poor and minorities.

Since 1960, the National Election Study surveys have asked the following question: "Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think that the government should just let each person get ahead on his own. And of course, other people have opinions somewhere in between. Where would you place yourself?" The percentage of those favoring Federal Government intervention declined from 65% in 1960 to 28.4% in 1988 (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1

"Government should see that every person has a job and a good standard of living" Percentages from 1960-1988<sup>3</sup>

	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988
Government	65.0	36.4	35.1	31.5	30.0	30.5	33.5	28.4
Middle of the Road	8.9	13.0	12.3	23.2	21.7	20.9	22.7	21.3
Individual	26.1	50.6	52.6	45.3	48.2	48.5	43.8	50.3

Between 1960 and 1964 the percentage of those who think that government should see that every person has a job and a good standard of living declined by almost thirty percentage points. It declined even further, though less dramatic, between 1964 and 1988, indicating that Reagan's welfare cuts were not only tolerated but supported by a majority of Americans.<sup>14</sup> All in all, the data in Table 6.1 strongly

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<sup>13</sup> Data for 1960 through 1980 from Abramson 1983, p.264, Table 15.1. The wording for 1960 is different: "The government in Washington ought to see that everybody who wants to work can find a job. Do you think the government should do this?" Data for 1984 from NES 1986, pp.210n, Variable 414; Data for 1988 from NES 1989/90, p.59, Variable 323. The answers were recoded into three categories for more clarity.

<sup>14</sup> In 1980, full 80% of the American public thought "that the people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes." A mere two percent thought that 'the money we pay in taxes' was not wasted by the government. Reagan campaigned on the ticket of limiting spending for 'uncontrollable domestic programs' and to end funding for 'illegitimate purposes.' And in fact, the proportion of the public who believe "that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes" declined significantly during Reagan's presidency compared to Carter's last year in office. It went down to 66.2% in 1984 and 64.0% in 1988. The reduced percentage of those who believed government wastes

support the argument that Reagan's welfare cuts built on a supportive consensus. Simultaneously, these data indicate great receptivity for rhetoric calling for a reduced role of government in fighting poverty (see Sections 5.5 and 5.8).

The public's positive response to Reagan's efforts to reduce government spending is reflected in findings of the 1984 and 1988 Election Studies: 66.7% and 61.3% respectively, of the public thought that the government should provide fewer public services or at least they should not be expanded.<sup>15</sup> In 1988, only 29.4% as compared to 38.5% in 1972-82 thought that the Federal Government should do more to solve the country's problems.<sup>16</sup> When asked whether

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tax money can be interpreted as a measure for public support for Reagan's policies (NES 1982, p.220, Variable 401; NES 1986, p.546, Variable 1063; NES 1989/90, p.476, Variable 956. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted).

<sup>15</sup> NES 1986, pp.189-191, Variables 375, 376, 377; NES 1989/90, pp.148n, Variables 302, 303, 304. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted.

In 1984, 83.6% of the public thought that Reagan would reduce services or keep them at the same level in order to deal with the deficit. The corresponding number for Bush in 1988 was 74.6%. In contrast, as little as 13.4% thought that Mondale would reduce services in order to consolidate the budget. The number for Dukakis was 13.1%. Since the public became less sympathetic towards government aid to the disadvantaged from the mid-Sixties on (cf. Table 6.2) and strongly supported a reduction of the annual deficit it is not at all surprising that the public favored Reagan/Bush over Mondale/ Dukakis.

<sup>16</sup> National Opinion Research Center (NORC) 1989, p.329, Q310A. The data from 1972-1982 were available in cumulated form only. However, this does not interfere with the goals of this study. The change in public opinion that took place before Reagan took office (represented by 1972-82) as

"the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans" only 30.7% supported strengthened efforts of the government in 1988 as compared to 40.1% in the 1972-1982 period.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1973 and 1980 the percentage of those who "think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor" declined from 58% to 42%.<sup>18</sup>

In 1983, in midst of the recession, only 21.3% of those asked in the National Election Study responded that they would increase spending for Food Stamps if they had a say in government.<sup>19</sup> Put differently, four out of five Americans were not willing to provide more Food Stamps for the poor in a time when hunger was becoming a growing domestic problem (cf. Section 2.1).

In October 1971, 72% of the public believed that the amount of money spent on welfare is 'about right' or even

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compared to the time when Reagan's presidency ended (represented by 1989) is clearly indicated by this data. The same is true for subsequent information relying on accumulated data.

<sup>17</sup> NORC 1989, p.328, Q309A. The answers were recoded into three categories for more clarity. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted.

<sup>18</sup> Niemi et al. 1989, p.35, Table 1.20

<sup>19</sup> NES 1986, p.515, Variable 1000. Only respondents with an answer to the question asked were counted.

'too much.' This may be interpreted that there was almost consensus among Americans that the poor receive enough welfare. Notwithstanding, the percentage of those who think that 'about right' or 'too much' is spent on welfare rose even further to a high of 83% in May 1980. Put differently, four out of five Americans thought that the amount of money spent for the poor is adequate if not too high.

Table 6.2

"Are we spending Too Much, Too Little, About Right on Welfare?" Percentages from 1971-1988<sup>20</sup>

	1971	1976	1980	1984	1988
Too Little	18	13	13	24	23
About Right	13	22	26	33	32
Too Much	53	60	57	40	42

The data above suggest that the public viewed itself as being burdened with an oversized and ineffective government being captured by the undeserving poor. It seems that substantial parts of the American public indeed blame the poor themselves for being poor. During the Seventies and Eighties vast majorities of the public believed the poor live at the expense of everyone else. Thus, it was claimed the government should reduce provisions for them (see Sections 5.3 'The Budget Deficit,' 5.4 'The Punitive Tax

<sup>20</sup> Niemi et al. 1989, p.89, Table 3.23.

System' and 5.5 'The Excessive Growth of Government').

In short, the survey data suggest that Reagan's cuts in anti-poverty programs were backed by a supportive consensus among the American public. Simultaneously, the data reveal large percentages of the public seem very receptive for Reagan's rhetoric calling for a reduction of welfare services.

### 6.3. Racist Tendencies in Public Opinion

Comparable to the attitudes towards the poor in general, a supportive consensus also existed towards Reagan's quest to reduce assistance for racial minorities. Though the public was relatively favorable towards government assistance to racial minorities during the late Fifties and early Sixties the trend reversed sharply after the riots of the mid-Sixties culminating in strong opposition against assistance for minorities in the Seventies and Eighties.

In March 1971, 61% of the American public thought that the amount of money spent on improving the situation of African-Americans, is 'about right' or 'too much.' It rose to 68% by March, 1980. This means that in 1980 only three out of ten Americans thought that the assistance provided for African-Americans is not adequate to compensate for the

effects of continued discrimination.<sup>21</sup>

Only twenty-five percent of the public believed in 1972-82 that "Blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards." This number went down to 18.0% in 1988.<sup>22</sup> Put differently, less than one in five Americans regards continued discrimination as a reason to assist African-Americans. This trend is particularly drastic if one considers that the number of those opposing assistance for the disadvantaged has been traditionally high.

Reagan's rhetorical creation of a 'Brotherhood of Man' (see Section 5.12) in America might have caused many people to believe racism is not an important issue anymore, at the same time implying that Blacks could be as well off as Whites if they would only try hard enough.

The 1988 National Election Study found that 57.6% of the respondents believe "If Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites," demonstrating that a clear majority of the public disregards the destructive

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<sup>21</sup> Niemi et al. 1989, p.85, Table 3.16. Reagan alluded to this sentiment in calling for an end of government spending for 'special interests.' The 'success' of Reagan in cutting assistance for African-Americans can be seen in the reduced number of those who think that 'about right' or 'too much' is spent for assisting Blacks (57% in 1989 as compared to 68% in 1980).

<sup>22</sup> NORC 1989, p.331, Q312A. The answers were recoded into three categories for more clarity. Only respondents with an opinion on the question asked were counted.

impact of racism on the economic situation of African-Americans.<sup>23</sup> It has to be noted in this context that the data were gathered from a representative cross-section of the American public including African-Americans. This means that the proportion of Whites who believe that the government has an obligation to aid Blacks is even lower than eighteen percent. The high percentage of those who think that "Blacks would be as well off as Whites" if they would just try harder, subliminally suggests that African-Americans are seen as undeserving of public support.

Subliminal racism can also be found in many Whites' opinion that "The government wastes too much tax money." In the year 1964, 51% of Whites thought that considerable sums of tax money is wasted by the government. Sixteen years later in 1980, 83% of Whites believed that the government wastes too much tax money.<sup>24</sup> Since vast majorities of the white public believe the poor and racial minorities receive too much federal support (cf. Table 6.2) it can be concluded that many Whites assume tax money is wasted because it is spent for supposedly illegitimate assistance to the

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<sup>23</sup> NES 1989/90, p.479, Variable 963. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted.

<sup>24</sup> Abramson 1983, p.230, Table 13.2. The original question was "The government wastes not much or only some tax money?" The numbers used above have been found by subtracting the percentage of those who believe that the government wastes not much or only some tax money from one-hundred.

'undeserving' poor which are stereotypically black. This goes in accordance with Reagan who subtly labeled the poor undeserving, implying that it is predominantly African-Americans and Mexican-Americans who constitute the undeserving poor (see Section 5.1 'The Truly Needy').

Generally speaking, the public often demanded more government activity in social policy fields when the vast majority profits (e.g. Social Security, general support for medical expenses, education etc.). Notwithstanding the sentiments against government intervention on behalf of the poor and racial minorities are high, they have even risen during the Seventies and Eighties in some respect. Thus one can conclude that there exists a supportive consensus among the public towards the Reagan administration's efforts to cut programs assisting the poor. In turn Reagan's policies and rhetoric reinforced conservative tenets of American political culture.

#### 6.4. The Public's Approval of Reagan

The public's support for the president is also indicated by his approval ratings. Reagan's presidential approval, like to his predecessors' declined during his administration. Nonetheless, with the exception of Kennedy, Reagan's end of term ratings are significantly higher than his predecessors'. Even the decline in the public's approval of him during the eight years of his presidency is remarkably

low (Table 6.3).

Table 6.3

Presidential Approval Ratings in Percent  
for Presidents Kennedy to Reagan in the First and Last  
Years of their Presidency<sup>25</sup>

President	% (1. Year)	% (Last Year)	Decline (% points)
Kennedy	76 (1961)	65 (1963)	11
Johnson	74 (1964)	42 (1968)	32
Nixon	61 (1969)	26 (1974)	35
Ford	54 (1974)	48 (1976)	6
Carter	62 (1977)	41 (1980)	21
Reagan	58 (1981)	52 (1988)	6

The approval of Reagan which was consistently high (55% in 1984 and 60% in 1986) also supports the argument that Reagan's policies against the poor were backed by a supportive consensus among the public. Though the public was dissatisfied with Reagan's handling of some public concerns,<sup>26</sup> he still had the public backing him,

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<sup>25</sup> Edwards and Gallup 1990, pp. 129, 163, 170, Tables 1.6, 3.12, 3.15

<sup>26</sup> During the 1982/83 recession Reagan's popularity declined temporarily. In the second quarter of 1982 the general approval rate of his performance as president was 44% as Gallup polls indicate. Only 37% of the public approved of his handling of the economy and as little as 23% approved of his policies to fight the high unemployment rate. One year later, in the second quarter of 1983, the respective numbers were even lower; the approval rate for his general performance as president was 43%. Only 37% approved of his economic policies and the percentage of those who agreed to his handling of the unemployment problem dropped to 20%. However, the relatively low approval of Reagan's domestic policies during the recession years do not

particularly in his administration's efforts to cut assistance for the poor and racial minorities as the data in Sections 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 indicate.

#### 6.5. The Presidential Elections of the 1980s

Another indicator for the public's approval of a president is his reelection or the election of a successor coming from the same political party.

The 1980 election was a popular vote against the apparent policy failures of president Carter. Domestic as well as international developments contributed to the image that Carter was a weak president. By the end of the Seventies the United States had double-digit inflation rates, a growing budget deficit, a rising unemployment rate and for the first time in over twenty years the poverty rate began to climb while welfare expenditures skyrocketed.

Ferguson and Rogers assert in accordance with other studies, that the 1980 election was principally "a referendum on Carter's bad economic performance."<sup>27</sup> Survey data strongly support this view.

The 1980 American National Election Study conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of

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contradict the finding that a supportive consensus existed among the public existed towards his quest to reduce assistance for those in need.

<sup>27</sup> Ferguson and Rogers 1986, p.35

Michigan found that as many as 77.8% of all respondents believed that Carter would not solve the American economy's problems. In contrast, 40.8% believed that Reagan would do 'extremely well, or ,quite well' in solving the economic problems this country faces<sup>28</sup> As the poll data in Sections 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 indicate, Reagan took office at a point in time when large parts of the American public supported a reduction of government assistance for the poor.

In 1984, Reagan was reelected president in a landslide victory over Walter Mondale. The fact that Reagan won the 1984 election has also been attributed to Mondale's being portrayed as insufficiently patriotic and captured by special interests (like the poor and racial minorities). Richard Darman, Assistant White House Chief of Staff, wrote in June 1984 in a recommendation for the upcoming presidential campaign:

"Paint Mondale as (a) weak, (b) a creature of special interests, (c) old style, (d) unprincipled, (e) soft in his defense of freedom, patriotic values, American interests, (f) in short, Carter II, ... Paint Ronald Reagan as the personification of all that is right with or heroized by America. Leave Mondale in a position where an attack on Reagan is tantamount to an attack on America's idealized image of itself - where a vote against Reagan is in some subliminal sense, a vote against mythic AMERICA."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> NES 1982, pp.211n, 218n, Variables 380 and 398. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted.

<sup>29</sup> Darman in Erickson 1985, p.100

Another problem in Mondale's campaign was his attempt to make the public aware of the complexity and severity of the problems the country faces. He had the difficult task explaining the structural causes of poverty while Reagan referred back to ideological myths which are easy to understand and already part of the American psyche.

While Mondale's message was relatively complex, Reagan told the public what it already knew. Mondale's Press Secretary Maxine Isaacs, addressing the 1984 campaign, put it the following way:

"Reagan would come out every day and he had perfect control of his story because he only did one major news thing a day ... He would say the grass is green. Then there would be a piece about Mondale explaining something terribly complicated about the deficit or arms control."<sup>30</sup>

The 1988 election proved the public's receptivity to conservative rhetoric once again. During the 1988 election campaign, Reagan's successor George Bush capitalized on Reagan's popularity with the American public. Time after time, Bush reiterated his desire to stay the course and build on the administration's record of "eight years of peace and prosperity."<sup>31</sup>

George Bush's rhetoric in campaign appearances and his political advertisements imitated Reagan, creating a false

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<sup>30</sup> Moore 1986, p.172

<sup>31</sup> ABC News Interactive 1989, Transcript from Opti Disk

sense of security, portraying Dukakis as unpatriotic, a liberal extremist, a typical tax and spend Democrat, and weak in his defense of American interests against inside and outside enemies. The TV ads of the Bush campaign labeled the potential president Dukakis a danger for America: "America can't afford that risk" was the ending of most TV spots.<sup>32</sup>

A pre-election survey conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Chicago indeed found that 20.8% of the respondents feel afraid of Dukakis, whereas only 14.7% ever felt afraid of Bush.<sup>33</sup> The same study found that George Bush made 33.2% of all respondents 'feel proud' whereas only 28.6% 'felt proud' because of Dukakis.<sup>34</sup>

As was argued repeatedly, the American public is traditionally conservative, particularly towards government assistance for the poor. Along with this goes the following data: A pre-election survey found that 55.2% of all respondents thought that a government headed by Michael Dukakis would make efforts "that every person has a job and a good standard of living." In contrast, only 12.7% believed

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<sup>32</sup> ABC News Interactive 1989, Transcript from Opti Disk

<sup>33</sup> NES 1989/90, pp.110, 113, Variables 216 and 220. Only respondents with an answer to the question asked were counted.

<sup>34</sup> NES 1989/90, pp.110, 113, Variables 217 and 221. Only respondents with opinion to the question asked were counted.

that George Bush would make comparable efforts.<sup>35</sup> Since only a minority of the American public believes that the government should provide jobs and a good standard of living for everybody (see Table 6.1) it is not surprising that Bush rather than Dukakis was elected in 1988.

#### 6.6. Conclusions

The different measures for the public opinion towards the poor and minorities indicate strong popular agreement with the conservative political agenda calling for a reduction of assistance for the poor. V.O. Key's notion of supportive consensus seems appropriate to describe the relationship among the vast majority of Americans towards the Reagan administration cutting or eliminating programs serving the poor. It explains the absence of a crisis of confidence despite the massive shift of wealth from the poor to the rich under Reagan.

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<sup>35</sup> NES 1989/90, pp.159n, Variables 324 and 325. The answers were recoded into three categories. Only respondents with an opinion to the question asked were counted.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 1980s have seen a massive reallocation of wealth: The American poor got poorer while the rich got richer. In addition, the proportion of the population living below the poverty line rose sharply during the Eighties. Despite this, there was no widespread public resistance to the domestic policies of the Reagan administration which contributed to the trend towards greater economic inequality. To the contrary, the public expressed its support for Reagan in a variety of ways; approval of him personally and his general presidential performance were relatively high. He was reelected in 1984 by a record landslide and former vice president George Bush was elected president in 1988.

The search for an answer to the question "Why was there no widespread resistance against Reagan's policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich?" began by examining materialistic individualism, racism and egalitarianism as major themes of the American political culture impacting the predicament of the poor. Materialistic individualism, racism, and equality simply defined in terms of equality before the law uphold disparaging myths and stereotypes about the poor and racial minorities. They help in screening the public from alternative public values and continually preserve the portrait of a society which is inherently just, offering equal opportunities to everyone. They also help maintain the assumption that 'superior

individuals' are rewarded materially and that material success is an indicator of such superiority. Economic success and failure, accordingly, are not considered the result of biased social, economic or political structures. Rather, they are attributed to mental, moral or biological qualities.

Political myths about the poor rooted in the American political culture remain widely accepted. They offer simple and non-contradictory explanations for complex social processes. Once they are part of the political culture they become instruments for ensuring public quiescence towards inegalitarian economic and social policies. The powerful, that is to say, those who control the creation and transmission of political myths, can thus further their interests.

Reagan reinvigorated myths about the poor conveyed by the American political culture. He permanently talked about the deserving poor and the truly needy. Employing those terms subtly but powerfully categorized the poor into two groups. It evoked the cognitive existence of poor persons, who supposedly were undeserving and not truly needy. The differentiation between the deserving and the undeserving poor has vast policy consequences. Cuts in welfare programs do not appear as attacks against the legitimate interests of the poor but as necessary measures to oust waste and fraud to protect the provisions for the truly needy. It is almost

a moral obligation to support welfare cuts in the name of the taxpayers and the deserving poor.

Several rhetorical themes applied by Reagan brought the working population in the United States in an apparently adversarial relationship to the non-working poor. Reagan repeatedly emphasized the punitive character of the tax system punishing the economically successful. The non-working poor were supposedly provided with excessive cash transfers and too many in-kind provisions supplied by the working population. The tensions that were created between the working and the non-working population hid the fact that the working poor suffered most from Reagan's welfare cuts.

The government prior to the Reagan administration was described as being an instrument of special interests (such as welfare recipients and racial minorities). In one way or another, these themes allude to fairness. The subliminal message was that fairness requires to cut assistance for the poor because in most cases they are undeserving.

Other themes of Reagan's rhetoric praised America as a nation free from discrimination and full with hope. This implies that all those who are poor, particularly racial minorities and women, are so because of their own deficiencies. Would they have made the appropriate efforts they could have easily freed themselves from poverty. The claim that women and minorities could be just as well off as men and Whites is implicitly sexist and racist since it

attributes their bad economic situation to innate ineptitude. It denies the obstacles faced by the disadvantaged in the political and economic systems.

Opinion polls reveal that the public has been traditionally resentful towards government assistance to the poor. The different measures for public opinion indicate strong popular agreement with the conservative political agenda calling for a reduction of assistance for the poor. Parts of the public, though already conservative, became even more so towards some forms of government assistance to the poor and minorities prior to, and during, Reagan's presidency. V.O. Key's notion of a supportive consensus is an appropriate description of the relationship between the public and Reagan in the Eighties. The existence of a supportive consensus explains why there was no widespread public resistance against Reagan's policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich.

In short: Throughout this paper I have argued that two mutually reinforcing factors mostly accounted for the public's quiescence towards the reverse redistribution of wealth. First, public acceptance of Reagan's rhetoric reflects American political culture which explains poverty in terms of personal ineptitude and looks suspiciously at government aid for the poor. Wealth is regarded as an expression of superior moral, mental or biological qualities implying the respective inferiority of the poor. Second,

Reagan's rhetoric reinvigorated stereotypes of the poor and racial minorities. It perfectly suited the public psyche as poll data indicate. In conclusion, a supportive consensus buttressed the Reagan administration's efforts to cut assistance for the poor, thus explaining the absence of widespread public resistance against the massive shift of wealth from the truly needy to the truly greedy.

#### Rhetoric and the Future of Politics

The initial question of this paper, why there was no widespread public resistance against Reagan's policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich is now answered. A related task for further research, adding to the topic addressed would be to examine the change in the nature of political discourse in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. One can observe that the public competition between rival policies was more and more replaced by a conservative hegemony over political discourse in the Seventies and the Eighties. Arguing along these lines might illuminate how talk about traditional values came to replace discourse over policies. This shift in public discourse facilitated the Reagan administration's quest to replace substance by style in politics.

Hanson (1985) argues that though material needs were satisfied for large parts of the American people throughout the Fifties and Sixties, the need for people to hold on to

non-material values became stronger. Neoconservative rhetoric offered these values: Family, faith, work and nation. An explanation as to why people in the Seventies and Eighties adhere to conservative symbols rather than to egalitarian themes which were more popular in the Sixties would broaden our comprehension why the Reagan administration could enact policies which took away from the poor and gave to the rich without facing broad public resistance. The changed notions of equality that existed in the 1960s as compared to the 1970s and 1980s illustrate how conservative interpretations of symbols became dominant over the course of the past years. Whereas equality in the 1960s was at least partly defined in terms of economic equality, its definition was reduced to equality before the law by the time Reagan took office. This allowed him to characterize anti-poverty programs as inherently unjust and unfair. On a more general level, an examination of the changed nature of political discourse enhances our understanding why there was no manifest crisis of legitimacy in the United States in the 1980s despite growing economic injustice.

The future of politics, and therefore the well-being of many people in this country depend on the re-establishment of political discourse. Once substance rather than oblique allusions to the real issues determines the outcome of political decisions the interests of the powerless should stand a better chance.

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## VITA

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