

TOWARD SELF-RELIANCE ... on Entitlements

Keeping People Dependent Helps Politicians Win Elections by Thomas Sowell

Those who regard government "entitlement" programs as sacrosanct, and regard those who want to cut them back as calloused or cruel, picture a world very different from the world of reality.

To listen to some of the defenders of entitlement programs, which are at the heart of the present financial crisis, you might think that anything the government fails to provide is something that people will be deprived of.

In other words, if you cut spending on school lunches, children will go hungry. If you fail to subsidize housing, people will be homeless. If you fail to subsidize prescription drugs, old people will have to eat dog food in order to be able to afford their meds.

This is the vision promoted by many politicians and much of the media. But, in the world of reality, it is not even true for most people who are living below the official poverty line.

Most Americans living below the official poverty line own a car or truck – and government entitlement programs seldom provide cars and trucks. Most people living below the official poverty line also have air conditioning, color television and a microwave oven – and these too are not usually handed out by government entitlement programs.

Cell phone and other electronic devices are by no means unheard of in low-income neighborhoods, where children would supposedly go hungry if there were no school lunch programs. In reality, low income people are overweight even more often than other Americans.

As for housing and homelessness, housing prices are higher and homelessness a bigger problem in places where there has been massive government intervention, such as liberal bastions like New York City and San Francisco. As for the elderly, 80 percent are homeowners, whose monthly housing costs are less than \$400, including property taxes, utilities, and maintenance.

The desperately poor elderly conjured up in political and media rhetoric are – in the world of reality – the wealthiest segment of the American population. The average wealth of older households is nearly three times the wealth of households headed by people in the 35 to 44-year-old bracket, and more than 15 times the wealth of households headed by someone under 35 years of age.

If the wealthiest segment of the population cannot pay their own medical bills, who can? The country as a whole is not any richer because the government pays our medical bills – with the money it takes from us.

What about the truly poor, in whatever age brackets? First of all, even in low-income and high-crime neighborhoods, people are not stealing bread to feed their children. The fraction of the people in such neighborhoods who commit most of the crimes are far more likely to steal luxury products that they can either use or sell to get money to support their parasitic lifestyle.

As for the rest of the poor, Professor Walter Williams of George Mason University long ago showed that you could give the poor enough money to lift them all above the official poverty line for a fraction of what it costs to support a massive welfare state bureaucracy.

We don't need to send the country into bankruptcy, in the name of the poor, by spending trillions of dollars on people who are not poor, and who could take care of themselves. The poor have been used as human shields behind which the expanding welfare state can advance.

The goal is not to keep the poor from starving but to create dependency, because dependency translates into votes for politicians who play Santa Claus.

We have all heard the old saying about giving a man a fish feeds him for a day,

while teaching him to fish feeds him for a lifetime. Independence makes for a healthier society, but dependency is what gets votes for politicians.

For politicians, giving a man a fish every day of his life is the way to keep getting his vote. "Entitlement" is just a fancy word for dependency.

As for the scary stories politicians tell, in order to keep the entitlement programs going, as long as we keep buying it, they will keep selling it.

Thomas Sowell is a nationally syndicated columnist and a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University. This piece was reprinted from the OpEd page of the 29 May 2011 **Connecticut Post**.