

On Public Obligation

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Poverty has a potent and provable impact on health, education, opportunity, safety, dignity, and overall quality of life for Americans. This article argues that our obligations to ameliorate poverty are not only private, religious, and charitable, they are public and governmental as well.

The link between poverty and health is acute. Those fortunate enough to enjoy greater wealth and income receive, of course, superior medical care. But they also eat healthier foods, live in safer communities, attend better schools, face diminished dangers in the workplace, and attain higher levels of education. They are less apt to embrace risky behaviors such as smoking, excessive drinking and physical inactivity [1]. They are also, predictably, more apt to be white and, on innumerable fronts, privileged. When it comes to opportunity, condition, dignity, longevity, and quality of life, poverty matters [1].

The overarching impact of economic disparity has recently been illustrated in the related arena of education. The correlation between poverty and educational achievement in the United States has been well documented since the famed Coleman Report of 1966 [2, 3]. In fact, nothing about American education has been more repeatedly demonstrated than the yawning gap between the attainment of the rich and that of the poor. New findings by Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University trace our income achievement gap over the past 50 years and conclude that it now far exceeds the racial achievement gap [4].

International research magnifies the story. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment show that among 15-year olds in the United States (and in the 13 countries outperforming us), students with lower economic status had much lower test scores than did their wealthier compatriots. None can credibly doubt that the lackluster comparative performance of American students on international tests is tied to our extraordinarily high rates of child poverty. Other advanced western democracies would not countenance a fifth of their children living in poverty [5]. In education, in health, in access to justice, in opportunity, in mobility, in life chances, we are plagued by our massive economic disparities.

In this brief essay I consider whether these economic privations ought to be deemed the concern of government. Are our obligations to those lodged at the bottom only private and charitable, or are they also public ones? Does the

American promise include a shared and compelling commitment to the notion that we are all in this hopeful enterprise together? Perhaps more profoundly than many would have predicted, in the first quarter of the 21st century, the question is a live and immensely contested one.

For me, perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer is a resounding "yes."

The first reason for my conclusion is lodged in the old-fashioned belief that we might actually mean what we say. We "ordain[ed] and establish[ed]" our Constitution "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, . . . promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty" [6]. The 14th amendment guaranteed to every person "the equal protection of the laws". Lincoln at Gettysburg declared us to be a nation "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that 'all men are created equal'" [7]. And we pledge allegiance endlessly to "liberty and justice for all" [8]. North Carolina's charter contains the additional foundational assurance that "all government of right originates from the people . . . and is . . . instituted solely for the good of the whole" [9].

I am the first to concede that these bold and inspiring commitments, state and federal, can be tough to square with the reality that the richest nation on earth, the richest nation in human history, embraces dramatically higher levels of poverty, particularly child poverty, than any of its first-world counterparts [5]. Still, like most, I reject the premise that these founding declarations are mere window dressing, platforms for hypocrisy. I subscribe to Chief Justice Warren's view of constitutional equity, espoused in *Brown v. Board of Education*: if we have fallen short of our boasts in the past, we're obliged to render them meaningful and effective now [10].

But if constitutional assertion doesn't persuade, in North Carolina we can also turn readily to history. A century ago, we had the highest illiteracy rate in the South and one of the highest in the country. We spent 21% of the national average, per pupil, on education—tying Alabama for last place. Comparative economic studies concluded that

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North Carolina was the least productive state in the nation. We placed near the bottom in per capita income. During World War II, we were stunned, and embarrassed, to learn that more candidates were declared physically unfit for military service in North Carolina than in any other state. As late as the 1960s, fully a third of North Carolina families lived in wrenching poverty. In 1970, we ranked 48th among the states in percentage of residents who had graduated from high school. Broadly speaking, in both competitive and humane terms, we found ourselves at the bottom of the South. And the South, as always, found itself at the bottom of the nation [11, 12].

Our plight is very different now. The derisive “Rip Van Winkle state” moniker has long since been left in the dust. In recent decades, we have been among the fastest-growing states in the nation. Poverty, though still massively troubling, has been reduced—in both absolute and relative terms. Changes in educational attainment, at the K-12 and higher education levels, have been among the most impressive in the country. Health care innovations in North Carolina have changed the lives of its citizens and have set the pace for other regions. The state can claim metropolitan, commercial, and intellectual centers that are the envy of much of the world [11, 12].

These massive and proud changes were not triggered by eliminating taxation, disinvesting in education, abandoning economic development, gutting the public sector, or ignoring the plight and the possibilities of the poorest North Carolinians. Rather, they resulted, often from wise and determined efforts to invest in a shared future for our children, our neighbors, our colleagues, and our successors. Although the road has sometimes been difficult, halting, and costly, its success has been undeniable. Now we frequently compete to lead the nation, not to trail it. North Carolina has thrived when it recognized, collectively, that our greatest traditional value is that we’re all in this together.

And the claim that poverty cannot be alleviated by public intervention is an ancient and greedy canard. In 1959, before the advent of Medicare and the War on Poverty, 35% of those over 65 and 27% of children in the United States lived in poverty [13, 14]. By 1973, the child poverty rate had been cut almost in half, dropping to 14%. By 1977, the senior poverty rate had been slashed by almost 60%. And today, despite the buffeting of recession, given the sustaining force of Social Security and Medicare, poverty among those over 65 is 9%—while it has soared to historic levels for other Americans. As Terry Sanford put it, we did not lose the War on Poverty, we “abandoned the battlefield” [15]. The United States has markedly higher poverty and child poverty rates than any other advanced western industrialized democracy [16]. No one actually thinks that is because our version of free market capitalism is the most tightly constrained.

Third, and finally, in 2012, it is simply not accurate, or even feasible, to think of the conditions of citizen health

as being the exclusive bailiwick of the private realm or the charitable sector. Our strands of involvement and obligation are, to understate, massively and inescapably intertwined.

To make the point, I like to recall a powerful speech John F. Kennedy gave at Madison Square Garden in May of 1962 [17]. A month earlier, in his State of the Union address, Kennedy had noted that “medical research has achieved new wonders, but these wonders are too often beyond the reach of too many people, owing to lack of income.” Bold steps “to provide health care for the aged under Social Security . . . must be undertaken this year” [18].

Kennedy took his case for reform on the road. Speaking without a prepared text to more than 20,000 people in the Madison Square Garden [17], he reminded his audience that opposition to public support for health care was rooted in the same claims used to try to thwart the Social Security Act itself—that government assistance to poor people will “sap” their independence. The “fact of the matter,” Kennedy chided, is “what saps someone’s spirit is working eight hours a week at straight time” for inadequate wages [17]. What “we are now talking about doing [in health care] the countries of Europe did years ago.” The “British, thirty years ago.” We are “behind every [nation in] Europe in this crucial matter of medical care for our citizens.”

Kennedy was outraged by reports that “doctors in hospitals in New Jersey said they wouldn’t treat anyone who paid their hospital bills through social security.” The “American people contributed half to two-thirds of the cost of those hospitals.” We pay “fifty-five percent of all [medical] research dollars.” And we spend huge sums to “help young men to become doctors.”

Those who fret that government action “spoil the pioneer heritage,” he argued, should “remember that the West was settled with [the help of] two great actions by the federal government.” President “Lincoln’s administration . . . [first] gave a homestead to any family that went west.” Second, “in 1862 [it] set aside government property to build our land grant colleges. The young president concluded:

This cooperation between an alert and progressive citizenry and a progressive Government is what has made this country great—and we shall continue as long as we have the opportunity to do so [17].

A nation that helps pay for the medical care of much of its citizenry, for the education of all of its students, that massively subsidizes housing for the wealthiest of its members, that taxes capital gains at lower rates than much ordinary income, that gives breathtaking levels of publicly-derived support to lavishly endowed private universities, and that bails out Wall Street barons, walks no comprehensible line of economic libertarianism. I am guessing it never will. What we could hope for, perhaps, is a government that invests in its people and its places in an effort to assure equal opportunity and dignity for all. NCMJ

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