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Families in Peril

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FAMILIES IN PERIL. By *Marian Wright Edelman*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1987. Pp. xii, 127. \$15.00.

Families in Peril by Marian Wright Edelman¹ deals with one of this nation's most critical problems, child poverty. What begins as an empirical, intellectual, relatively uncontroversial, and potentially useful appraisal of the current condition of the American family, however, unfortunately results in little more than Edelman's Last Stand on the (Ultra) Liberal Platform. This is unfortunate primarily because Edelman destroys much of the credibility she earns throughout the book. While chapters 2 and 3 focus on presenting statistical information, the bulk of chapters 4 and 5 plunge head first into the age-old diatribe on social welfare policy on an emotive rather than cerebral level.² In addition, Edelman's tone wavers throughout the book. She begins with an impartial analysis and ultimately concludes with an

1. Marian Wright Edelman, Spelman College and Yale Law School graduate, has been President of the Children's Defense Fund since 1973. In 1986, she delivered the W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures on which this book was based. Her accomplishments include the opening of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund Office in Jackson, Mississippi and involvement in the establishment of the Head Start program for pre-school children in that state.

2. For example, in discussing the merits of supporting those whom she deems the "underclass" — that group of families with a parent who is physically able yet unwilling to work — she offers the following resolution: "[I]t is more important to our society that every child has enough to eat than that every parent be forced to work." P. 87. In making such a remark, she ignores the concerns addressed by many who take a more conservative posture; namely, that it is simply "unfair" or socialistic to force taxpayers to support those who voluntarily choose not to make an effort to support themselves.

In addition, in setting the tone of chapter 5, she remarks that "[o]ur political leaders are turning this nation's plowshares into swords and bringing good news to the rich at the expense of the poor." P. 95. The following passage captures the essence of the entire book:

Feeding a hungry child or preventing needless infant deaths in a decent, rich society should not require detailed policy analysis or quantifiable outcome goals or endless commissions.

impassioned plea to save the family and alleviate the “widespread suffering in our city streets and farmlands” (p. x). The result of this drastic style switch is that runaway, impassioned pleas dilute her analytical credibility. Edelman’s ultimate goal is simple and uncontroversial: She wishes to eradicate poverty and all of its consequences and to create a society in which every child can live a decent life and possess realistic hope for the future. Her proposal for achieving this result, however, is far from simple and further yet from uncontroversial.

The book begins, appropriately, with an essential, although somewhat convoluted, discussion of the facts; more accurately, the discussion sets forth hardcore statistics. Edelman devotes the bulk of the first chapter to an elaborate presentation and discussion of the statistics relating to the black family in America. She uses these statistics expertly to accomplish two main goals. First, she carefully attempts to draw causal connections between certain prevalent characteristics of black families and their (relatively) bleak condition. She then attempts to use the statistics to eradicate societal myths regarding the poor generally, and blacks specifically.

With respect to the first of these objectives, the conclusions she derives from her analysis can be summed up as follows: The primary reason why the condition of black families, as compared to white families, is so grim is that young black marriages simply fail to form as easily as white marriages (p. 6). This, coupled with the relatively higher rate of adolescent pregnancy and births among black females, results in a disproportionately high number of unmarried black mothers. The causes and effects of this situation are thus tightly intertwined and often indistinguishable. Edelman urges that the chicken and egg inquiry be ended, and that efforts be directed at solving the problem rather than at attaining a theoretically precise evaluation of the interaction of its components (p. 9).

The ancillary question of why there are so many fatherless black families is answered by the same conclusion — first marriages among blacks fail to form easily. Upon examining other factors contributing to this dilemma (such as the higher rate of institutionalization among black males, a higher death rate among black males, and the large number of black males who are apparently “missing” from the census), Edelman concludes that such factors are relatively minor contributions to the problem of fatherless families (p. 12). In addition, she draws a direct correlation between declining black male employment and declining marriage rates among young blacks. This correlation ultimately leads to her proposed solution: “[T]he key to bolstering black families, alleviating the growth in female-headed households,

They require compassionate action. . . . [L]et us be careful not to hide behind cost-benefit analyses when human survival is at issue.

and reducing black child poverty lies in improved education, training, and employment opportunities for black males and females" (p. 14). Therefore, her recommendation, drawing upon that of William Wilson,³ is that the black unemployment problem be given top priority in "public policy agendas designed to enhance the status of families" (p. 15).

Another objective Edelman seeks to achieve by application of statistical analysis is the shattering of commonly held myths about the poor and about blacks. The best example of this is Edelman's use of facts and statistics to dispel the myths surrounding the social welfare system, particularly Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the motivation and behavior attributed to welfare recipients. For instance, Edelman adeptly illustrates how the contention that welfare is a huge drain on public resources and that families on AFDC are living "too well" is an exaggerated, if not unsupported, statement. Her criticism, through the use of facts and figures, of the "total-cost" argument—which contends that the combined benefit levels to a family are extremely high—is convincing, although somewhat unnecessarily accusatory.⁴ Some of her statistics are quite illuminating: The bulk (72%) of Medicaid expenditures in 1984 went to elderly or disabled recipients, none of whom were on AFDC and many of whom were white; in 1984, more than 50% of the foodstamp recipients were not in AFDC households; the combined value of AFDC and food stamps is insufficient to lift families out of poverty;⁵ and finally, less than 25% of the families on AFDC receive housing assistance (pp. 69-70).

In examining the child poverty crisis in America, Edelman presents several reasons why we should invest in all our children. First, and foremost, there is a moral obligation on the part of adults to meet the needs of those who cannot provide for themselves by virtue of their youth. Second, it is socially desirable to provide opportunities for children to obtain the education and skills necessary if they are to be expected to participate in, and contribute to, society during their adult lives. Third, a reciprocation factor exists by which our self-interest is furthered by ensuring a future pool of supportive adults. Fourth, society needs the contributions of an increasingly scarce supply of youth. And finally, the cost to society of *not* investing in our children is greater than the cost of investing in them.⁶

Edelman's analysis of child poverty, its causes, and alternative so-

3. Mr. Wilson is a member of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago and an analyst of black family and civil rights organizations.

4. "The total-cost argument is a shell game, with the administration betting that it can move the pea faster than the public eye can follow." P. 69.

5. Poverty in this sense is determined by the designated poverty level of income for a family of a given size.

6. Pp. 30-31. Edelman illustrates this last point through a series of examples that depict a

lutions, ultimately leads her to place most of the blame on the government for its "misguided budget priorities" (p. 44). Although she acknowledges from the beginning that efforts from both the public and private sectors must be made to alleviate the dire circumstances of so many children (and parents), her examination of causes and solutions lapses into a blame-the-government mode very quickly. For example, she condemns the government for decreasing its support to children and their families during their time of need, when economic recession, unemployment, low wages, and increased taxes have placed incredible burdens on families struggling to survive (p. 40). She denounces past and present budget priorities as indicative of "perverse national values" (p. 37) that essentially lend support to a "make the rich richer and the poor poorer" public policy.⁷ She argues that the government's role in addressing and adequately responding to the crisis requires that certain affirmative steps be taken by the public sector and facilitated by the private sector. She labels essential such affirmative steps as (1) creating jobs in the public and private sectors through the expansion of job training programs both for the minority poor and for youth, (2) raising the minimum wage to a point that would allow a full-time worker to support a family above the poverty level, (3) guaranteeing health insurance for all, (4) insuring affordable, quality childcare, (5) restoring (and increasing) the social welfare benefits cut by the post-1980 budget, including an expansion of Medicaid, reformation of the AFDC programs, and the enactment of a minimum national benefit level, (6) expanding the Head Start program for comprehensive early childhood development, (7) relieving the tax burden on the poor by increasing the value of tax provisions that benefit them the most, such as the standard deduction, personal exemption, and Earned Income Tax Credit, and (8) initiating sex education and access to family planning services and counseling in the public schools (pp. 45-46; 54; 85-86).

But the end of the book digresses further and further into an emotionally-laden, impassioned appeal to human compassion, taking Edelman further and further away from the goals she initially targets. It becomes increasingly apparent that this book is Edelman's ideological statement to society. The arguments she makes on behalf of those she defends fall strictly within the realm of public policy debate. It is therefore impossible to engage in an objective evaluation of her reasoning without involving oneself as an advocate in the political debate, albeit unintentionally. There is nothing wrong with making a political statement, but the problem with evaluating such a statement is that

greater cost to the public over the long run of "curing" rather than "preventing" in areas of health, education, employment, and family stability. Pp. 31-32.

7. As a result, she observes a "new American apartheid between rich and poor, white and black, old and young, government and needy, corporation and individual, military and domestic needs." P. 37.

there is no "right" answer, no precedent to examine, no statute to interpret. While it is difficult to imagine anyone contending that it is desirable to raise impoverished, abused, malnourished, unloved, and uneducated children, ensuring that this does not happen in our society may create conflicts with other values equally strong or even stronger than those relating to the condition of children. For example, a capitalistic society values greatly the individual's freedom to determine, in essence, her own destiny through labor, intellect, and perseverance, and sees efforts by government to reduce the inequitable, yet inevitable, results of such a system as a threat of socialism. Differences in fundamental human values are ultimately at the core of the controversy — for some, "unfairness" means allowing those who cannot (for whatever reason) provide for themselves to suffer; for others, "unfairness" means forcing those who *can* provide for themselves, to support those who don't.

With this in mind, the fundamental flaw in Edelman's book is lack of focus, or more precisely, scattered focus. The messages she conveys are too numerous, too controversial, and conveyed much too passionately to conform to the documentary style the book initially seems to adopt. She runs the risk of losing the credibility she attains in the "informative" chapters by regressing into scathing attacks on the current administration, resorting to an appeal to compassion rather than to intellect and logic, and circumventing the strongest arguments against her position. At one level, she purports to engage strictly in a campaign for children by addressing their rights and needs. On another level, her goal seems to be to convince her audience that the Reagan administration is the greatest evil the poor have ever had to contend with, exemplified by its "misguided budget priorities" of increased military spending and decreased spending on social welfare programs.⁸ On yet another level, her goal seems to be to arouse support and sympathy for the predicament of blacks in this country and to defuse typical stereotypes, prejudices, and biases while at the same time garnering support for an increased allocation of resources to programs that primarily benefit blacks. There is nothing at all objectionable about any of these goals, but piling them all under the auspices of a crusade for children leaves the reader feeling as if she has been led astray.

Edelman's tactics for persuading her audience to support one side of a traditionally controversial issue, whether deliberate or not, come across as somewhat dishonest. She realizes that the people she needs to reach the most, the conservatives, are typically a white, middle-

8. Ms. Edelman also finds little redeeming value in the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings balanced budget amendment: "This morally bankrupt law seeks mindlessly to lower a \$200 billion annual deficit, which sick and hungry children did not cause and which we cannot solve by hurting them." P. 96.

class group of people who have varying suspicions and biases about the welfare system. She also seems to realize that traditional liberal arguments regarding a moral duty to provide everyone in this wealthy society with a decent life have not successfully convinced the steadfast conservatives. She must overcome the "socialism" stigma associated with the actions she endorses.

Edelman's tactics for overcoming this incredible barrier focus upon concerns central to the white, conservative, middle- and upper-class. First, she places children at the forefront of her discussion as a primary concern. This is not to imply that her concern for children is anything but genuine. Nonetheless, children make a convenient common denominator that attracts the attention, sympathy, and compassion of everyone, even the white middle-class. And one becomes suspicious about her professed intent to raise the nation's consciousness regarding the problem of child poverty when she devotes such a great deal of discussion to other social problems such as racism, discrimination, tax burdens on the poor, and wealth disparity in this country. Admittedly, anything that affects parents will ultimately affect children. However, Edelman seems to be taking on what is really a broader objective than merely helping children: She advocates just as strongly liberal methods for curing the assorted social evils that accompany poverty, racial discrimination, and unequal opportunity.

Edelman also attempts to persuade her readers that we will all benefit from increasing benefits to the poor, by adopting what she calls a pro-family policy. However, Edelman completely ignores some very crucial stumbling blocks to an acceptance of her proposals: The economic costs to many people are not only real but may include a threat to their perception of a democratic form of government. Edelman's casual statement that the expanded "Social-Security-like" (p. 84) system she would like to see implemented would leave the economy unharmed is questionable at best. Furthermore, she never addresses many people's primary objection to the welfare system: its susceptibility to abuse.

In the final two chapters of the book Edelman explodes into action, attacking everyone and everything that can possibly have an effect on the situation of the poor. She accuses the "greedy military weasel" (p. 99), the "unfairness weasel" (p. 101), the "bystander weasel" (p. 101), and the "ineffectiveness weasel" (p. 102), of "gnawing away at the rights of our children and the moral underpinnings of our democratic society" (p. 99). As a last resort she appeals to compassion: "We could act out an old-fashioned notion — one of those traditional notions of which President Reagan is so fond. It is called compassion" (p. 87).

In the final analysis, Edelman has made a commendable effort to expose the unpleasant and sobering truth about the state of the Ameri-

can family today. However, it is disappointing that in the end she undermines the persuasiveness of her analytical conclusions, the solutions she proposes, and her overall message, by trying to fight too many battles at the same time.

— *Nellie Pappas*