

Always With Us:

Recurring Themes in the Fight to End Poverty

Certain themes and threads have run through America's antipoverty efforts since colonial times. This section looks at five of them:

- No Free Rides: The Chronic Concern That Someone is Getting Something for Nothing
- The "Deserving," The "Undeserving," and "The Culture of Dependency"
- Cutting the Rolls
- Personal Responsibility and Bootstraps
- Thrift, Training, and Temperance

No Free Rides: The Chronic Concern That Someone Else Is Getting Something for Nothing

The English settlement at [Jamestown](#) was scarcely two years old in the spring of 1609, and its survival was in doubt. Malaria, typhoid, dysentery, lack of food, and periodic attacks by native tribes had sent a majority of the original colonists to their graves.

Faced with the colony's imminent collapse, Captain John Smith issued an ultimatum to those still alive, many of whom were high-born gentlemen averse to manual labor:

“

Countrymen, the long experience of our late miseries, I hope is sufficient to persuade every one to a present correction of himself, and think not that either my pains, nor the [investors'] purses, will ever maintain you in idleness and sloth. I speak not this to you all, for diverse of you I know deserve both honor and reward, better than is yet here to be had: but the greater part must be more industrious, or starve, how ever you have been heretofore tolerated by the authorities of the Council, from that I have often commanded you. You see now that power rests wholly in myself: you must obey this now for a Law, that he that will not work shall not eat (except by sickness he be disabled) for the labors of thirty or forty honest and industrious men shall not be consumed to maintain an hundred and fifty idle loiterers.

”





*“...he that will not work shall not eat
(except by sickness he be disabled) ...”*

*Captain John Smith
Jamestown 1609*

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Although Captain Smith addressed his remarks to a collection of 17th century grandees, he unwittingly established one of the central themes in a long-running disagreement over the most effective way to address poverty in America. Many of the stock phrases are there. Update the language a bit, and you have the makings of a modern-day speech on welfare reform:

“...think not that either my pains, nor the [investors’] purses, will ever maintain you in idleness and sloth.”

“...the greater part must be more industrious, or starve ...”

“...he that will not work shall not eat (except by sickness he be disabled) ...”

“...the labors of thirty or forty honest and industrious men shall not be consumed to maintain an hundred and fifty idle loiterers.”

Never mind that recent historical and archaeological evidence suggests that poor judgment in choosing the colony’s site, ineptitude in dealing with native people, and a series of calamities—drought, severe storms, disease, and a plague of rats that contaminated food stores—may have had as much to do with Jamestown’s near-demise as the colonists’ poor work ethic. The storyline of a strong leader compelling “idle loiterers” to do their share has become so ingrained in the popular imagination that it may be impervious to historical fact.

The “Deserving,” The “Undeserving,” and “The Culture of Dependency”

The fear that “idlers” are getting a free ride has, to varying degrees, affected efforts to address poverty in America. An example is the longstanding preoccupation with determining who among the poor is **“deserving” of concern.**

When John Smith declared “he that will not work shall not eat (except by sickness he be disabled),” he drew the first American distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. The “deserving poor” are widows, orphans, the aged, the infirm, and the mentally ill.¹ As for the “undeserving poor” ... officials in colonial Boston set forth a description that left little room for doubt:

“Persons going about in any town or county begging, or persons using subtle craft, juggling, or unlawful games or plays, or feigning themselves to have knowledge in physiognomy, palmistry, or pretending that they can tell destinies, fortunes, or discover where lost or stolen goods may be found, common pipers, fiddlers, runaways, stubborn servants or children, common drunkards, common nightwalkers, pilferers, wanton and lascivious persons, either in speech or behaviour, common railers or brawlers, such as neglect their callings, misspend what they earn, and do not provide for themselves or the support of their families.”²

In the early 1700s, Puritan minister Cotton Mather put a divine spin on John Smith’s earlier admonition by stating unequivocally that “for those who indulge themselves in idleness, the express command of God unto us is, that we should let them starve.”³ Obviously, “those who indulge themselves in idleness” belonged in the “undeserving” column.

By the 1800s, a sizable number of well-born, well-educated reformers were dedicating themselves to improving the lives of poor people. But even they worried that dispensing money or other forms of relief to those who did not work would create a “culture of dependency.” Josephine Shaw Lowell, a founding member of New York’s Charity Organization Society, addressed the Seventeenth Annual Conference of Charities (1892) and declared:

“If the advocates of public relief contend that there should be no stigma attached to its receipt, the answer is that, in that case, the tendency would be toward the condition where the whole people would be ready to accept an income from so-called public funds, and that the resulting loss of energy and industry would be sufficient to plunge any nation into a greater poverty than any now suffers. ...It is not because paupers are primarily more lazy than other people that they will not work for a living if they can be supported without working. If you will consider, you will find that you do not know any one (or, if you do, you regard him or her as a most extraordinary individual) who *works for a living* when it is not necessary, when the living is supplied from some source without any conditions which are dishonorable or irksome.”⁴

In the 20th century, President Franklin D. Roosevelt used the full power of the federal government in an effort to alleviate the poverty and economic hardship

¹ Krawczynski, Keith, *Daily Life in the Colonial City*, Greenwood Press, 2013.

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, Volume 17, 1892.*

brought on by the Great Depression. But in his 1935 State of the Union Address he also declared that:

“

The lessons of history, confirmed by the evidence immediately before me, show conclusively that continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit. It is inimical to the dictates of a sound policy. It is in violation of the traditions of America. Work must be found for able-bodied but destitute workers.

The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief.⁵

”

Opponents of antipoverty programs still use Roosevelt's quote to bolster their position, but they rarely include the next passage in which he told Congress:

“

We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their self-reliance, and courage and determination. ...

The Federal Government is the only governmental agency with sufficient power and credit to meet this situation. We have assumed this task, and we shall not shrink from it in the future. It is a duty dictated by every intelligent consideration of national policy to ask you to make it possible for the United States to give employment to all of these three-and-a-half million people now on relief, pending their absorption in a rising tide of private employment.⁶

”

Federal efforts to combat poverty intensified during the mid-1960s when President Lyndon Johnson committed the country to a “[War on Poverty](#)” that resulted in the passage of major antipoverty initiatives. Among them were Medicare, Medicaid, an expanded food stamp program, and the Head Start early childhood education program.

But Americans have never had a high tolerance for long conflicts, and the War on Poverty was no exception. The last two decades of the 20th century saw a shift away from major federal antipoverty initiatives.

Ronald Reagan made welfare fraud a high-profile campaign issue during his unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 1976. (The term “welfare queen” entered the political and public discourse at roughly the same time, but there is no evidence that Reagan actually used it in his campaign.) After winning the White House in 1980, President Reagan pursued policies intended to reduce direct federal involvement in antipoverty efforts. His views, and perhaps the prevailing view in America during the 1980s, might have been summed up best in a 1987 remark he made to reporters while walking to the presidential helicopter: “We fought a war on poverty, and poverty won.”

The push for a reduction in federal antipoverty efforts continued into the 1990s and culminated in passage of the [Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996](#). In signing the legislation, President Clinton declared, “Today we are ending welfare as we know it.” For the time being, those on the personal responsibility/up-by-your-bootstraps side of the philosophical divide wielded greater political influence than those who favored a higher degree of federal involvement and greater public funding.



5 [Franklin D. Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, 1935.](#)

6 [Franklin D. Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, 1935.](#)

Cutting the Rolls

For as long as there have been public assistance efforts, there have been calls to cut them. The *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996* is one of the more recent examples, but as Keith Krawczynski notes in *Daily Life in the Colonial City*, people without the means to support themselves in colonial times were often auctioned off to the lowest bidder and placed in private households, where they served as cheap labor. “At times,” writes Krawczynski, “the indigent were treated like unwanted dogs, bandied about from one family to another by councilmen seeking the cheapest terms or by caretakers tired of their charges.”

When even that proved too costly, a number of colonial communities opened almshouses. Also known as poorhouses or workhouses, they were more cost effective, but arguably less humane.⁷ Boston’s was among the first, established in 1662 “for the relief of the poor, the aged, and those incapacitated for labor; of many persons who would work, but have not the wherewithal to employ themselves; of many more persons and families, who spend their time in jolliness and tipling, and who suffer their children shamefully to spend their time in the streets, to assist, employ, and correct whom the proposed institution was provided.”⁸

The practice of consigning indigent people to almshouses continued into the 20th century. Nineteenth century reformers considered it a form of protection, a way to separate the “worthy poor” from the “vicious poor.”⁹

Personal Responsibility and Bootstraps

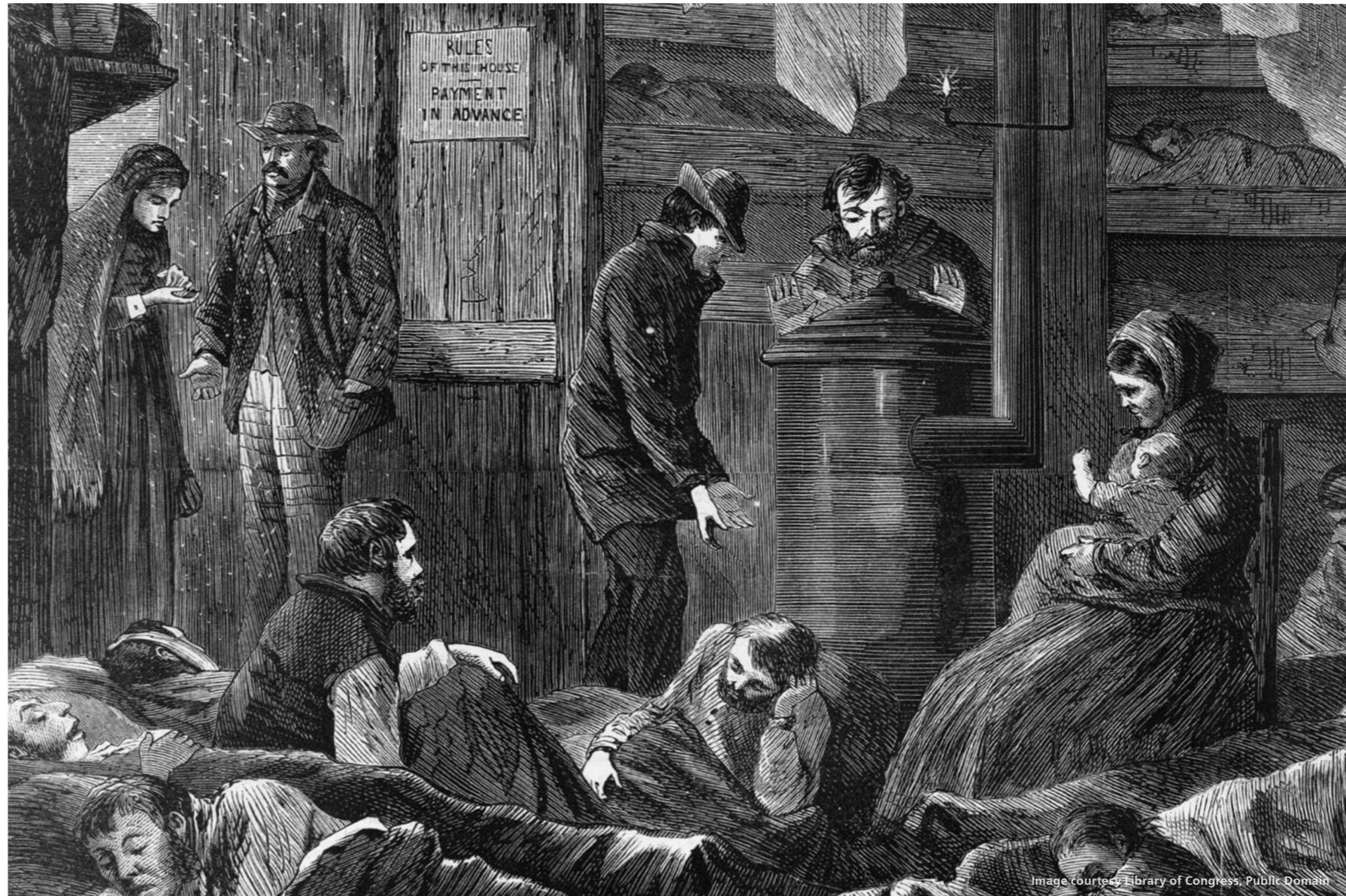
“Personal responsibility” and the perennial call for poor people to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” are also long-running themes in the history of poverty in America. Both terms have been in widespread use for a long time, in

part because they are broad enough and vague enough to suit the purposes of almost anyone who wants to use them in just about any context.

But for those seeking a clear reference point, Ron Haskins’s 2009 essay—“[The Sequence of Personal Responsibility](#)”—defines personal responsibility as “the willingness to both accept the importance of standards that society establishes for individual behavior and to make strenuous personal efforts to live by those standards.” Mr. Haskins is Co-Director of the Brookings Center on Children and Families, and, as [his bio](#) on the Brookings website notes, “he was instrumental in the 1996 overhaul of national welfare policy.”

In his essay he argues that:

“Personal responsibility also means that when individuals fail to meet expected standards, they do not look around for some factor outside themselves to blame. The demise of personal responsibility occurs when individuals blame their family, their peers, their economic circumstances, or their society for their own failure to meet standards. The three areas of personal decisionmaking in which the nation’s youth and young adults most need to learn and practice personal responsibility are education, sexual behavior and marriage, and work.”



7 Krawczynski, Keith, *Daily Life in the Colonial City*, Greenwood Press, 2013.

8 http://www.cityofboston.gov/Images_Documents/Guide%20to%20the%20Almshouse%20records_tcm3-30021.pdf

9 *Ibid*

Again, this is not a recently emerged philosophical position. The focus on personal responsibility “marks more than a turn away from the War on Poverty,” writes Joel Schwartz in *Fighting Poverty with Virtue*. “It also marks a return to the antipoverty strategy of the moral reformers of the 19th century.”¹⁰

A strong sense of morality guided the efforts of 19th century reformers. Although they did not necessarily agree on specifics, they were nearly unanimous in the belief that improving the character of poor people was one of the keys to alleviating poverty. Many of their overall beliefs and principles found expression in the popular writings of [Horatio Alger](#).

Hardly anyone mentions Horatio Alger these days. Contemporary critics either scorn or ignore his work. Yet Horatio Alger (1832–1899) was once among America’s most popular and influential writers, winning considerable fame as the author of “boys’ fiction.” His books sold millions of copies and profoundly influenced popular American thought during the 50-year period following the Civil War. The term “Horatio Alger story” was synonymous with “American success story.”

Alger’s writing — a mixture of fable and self-help — reinforced the widely-held 19th century belief that poverty was no barrier to success in America’s fluid society, and any American boy, no matter how poor, could rise in the world and achieve success through hard work and clean living. Each of his stories followed the same rags-to-riches formula: A poor boy eager for financial success has to overcome a particular weakness or form of temptation and triumph over a villainous rich man and/or the villainous rich man’s malign son. Invariably, the hero prevails through hard work, courage, strength of character, and good fortune, with good fortune often coming in the form of help from a benevolent businessman who tells a young protagonist something along the lines of “I hope, my lad, you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free

country poverty is no bar to a man’s advancement.”

Although Alger’s popularity has long since faded, many of the beliefs expressed in his stories continue to have an impact on present-day policy discussions and public opinion. A sizable number of Americans continue to believe that personal responsibility, hard work, and virtuous living are viable stand-alone substitutes for government-funded antipoverty initiatives. More than a third of the respondents in a [2013 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll](#) agreed that “too much welfare” and a “lack of work ethic” are chiefly responsible for persistent poverty.

Yet in a [2012 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center](#), 55 percent of the respondents said they or a member of their household had received benefits from one of six major federal entitlements programs, including Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare, unemployment benefits, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also known as food stamps).

So, here’s the question: At a time when [income inequality is rising](#) and [upward mobility seems to have stalled](#), why do Horatio Alger’s 19th century views still hold such sway?

Part of the answer may be that the personal responsibility “thread” is tightly woven into America’s rags-to-riches narrative, and that narrative is entwined with how we see ourselves. If we were to acknowledge that, despite our best efforts, poverty is a condition that can carry over from one generation to the next, then we also might have to consider the possibility that: a) hard work and tenacity might not be enough to overcome any obstacle, and/or b) ours is a society in which class boundaries are more rigid than we would like to believe.



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10 Schwartz, Joel, *Fighting Poverty with Virtue*, Indiana University Press, 2000.