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# Reconstructing Poverty Discourse: Poverty and Reagan's Narrative Rationality

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**Reconstructing Poverty Discourse: Poverty and Reagan's Narrative Rationality**

**Thesis submitted to  
The Graduate College of  
Marshall University**

**In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Communication Studies**

**by**

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2005**

## **ABSTRACT**

### **RECONSTRUCTING POVERTY DISCOURSE: POVERTY AND REAGAN'S NARRATIVE RATIONALITY**

**By Ryan Phillip McCullough**

This thesis examines President Ronald Reagan's poverty discourse during his first term. Using the work of Walter Fisher, this study examines Reagan's narrative rationality in constructing images of welfare recipients and the welfare system in the justification of his policies. By identifying links between Reagan's rhetoric and the rhetoric of debates leading to the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), this thesis supports Asen's (2002) claim that Reagan created a "discursive context" that made passage of PRWORA possible. Moreover, the study suggests the utility of using Skowronek's (1997) "Recurrent Structure of Presidential Authority" in understanding United States Presidential Discourse.

**DEDICATION**

*For Mom and Dad*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

During the reauthorization of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, P.L. 104-193 (PRWORA), Ron Haskins (2001), a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution stated:

After five years, it is reasonable to call the welfare reform law of 1996 the most successful large scale social reform since the New Deal. Welfare is down and work is up; earnings are up and poverty is down; illegitimacy has stopped its relentless increase; and slightly more children now live in two-parent families.

And a major reason for these felicitous outcomes appears to be that Congress and President Clinton decided to scrap the old dependency-inducing welfare system in favor of a system based on work in exchange for public support. (¶ 25)

This statement during the reauthorization of PRWORA indicates two things about the legislation. First, the passage of PRWORA, or welfare reform, was a significant moment in bipartisanship, and second, welfare reform has made significant steps to reduce poverty in America.

However, despite the bipartisanship, there is an alternative interpretation of the effects PRWORA. Susan Brin Hyatt (2001), assistant professor of Anthropology at Temple University, in *The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics, and Impoverish ed People in the United States*, states:

The events and rhetoric that surrounded the passage of the welfare reform legislation and those that have taken place subsequently are emblematic of a broader series of transformations that are reshaping a political landscape within which the “problem of poverty” is growing ever more intractable. (p. 203)

In other words, the language that shaped the passage of PRWORA created a political context in which poverty will become more and more difficult to abate as a result of “the incremental dismantling of the structures of the welfare state” (Hyatt, 2001, p. 203).

What was significant about the rhetoric of these debates?

A number of studies (Asen, 2002, 2003; Gring-Pemble, 2001, 2003) indicate the importance of the rhetorical construction of poor people, welfare recipients, and the welfare system leading up to and during the passage of PRWORA. This occurred despite the historical contradictions that mark poverty and welfare discourses (Asen, 2001, 2002, 2003). Who or what was persuasive or significant enough to foster a rhetorical context in which support for such sweeping reforms of the welfare system was possible?

#### The Turning Point in Welfare Policy Debate

Robert Asen (2002) tracked the development of images of poor people in the public sphere leading to and during welfare reform of the 1990s. Asen (2002) contends “Reagan’s election as the 40<sup>th</sup> president of the United States represented a turning point in social welfare policy deliberations” (p. 68). Reagan “created a discursive context favorable to government retrenchment” (Asen, 2002, p. 68). Essentially, Reagan set the tone for welfare reform of the 1990s. In creating this context, Asen argues, “Reagan and his supporters reversed prevailing political language and returned to moralistic, individualistic interpretations of a person’s socioeconomic status” (2002, p. 69). In other

words, Reagan framed an individual's socioeconomic status as a result of personal responsibility.

As stated earlier, historically, contradictions marked poverty and welfare discourses (Asen, 2001, 2002, 2003). Specifically, Asen (2002) notes:

The cross-purposes of sustenance and deterrence and their intersections with indexes of deservingness and underservingness have been crucial points of departure. Public assistance has been designed at the same time to force the “able-bodied” poor into the paid labor market and to provide relief for the deserving poor. (p. 26).

Reagan and his supporters “did not mimic historical poverty discourses, nor was their discourse simply derivative of past eras. Instead, they invented a Gospel of Wealth for the 1980s, gesturing to the New Deal in their promise of safety net for the truly needy”(Asen, 2002, p. 69). In Reagan's poverty discourse, by referring to the New Deal, personal responsibility and a social safety net could coexist.

In his specific analysis of Reagan's discourse, Asen examined speeches on February 5, 1981, and February 18, 1981, outlining his economic recovery plan (2002, p. 82-89). Drawing from Kenneth Burke, Asen found “multiple associations of equivalence and contrariety” in Reagan's speeches (2002, p. 87). According to Asen (2002), Reagan's speeches are understood in the following way: “American people = individual worker = business operator = American industry = Ronald Reagan ≠ federal government = non-needy (cheats, double-dippers, shirkers) = politicians = bureaucrats” (p. 88). This pattern of association and dissociation vilifies the federal government; at the same time, it ignores the role of capitalism and “questions of social justice” (Asen, 2002, p. 88). Asen

claims Reagan successfully shifted “frames of reference of deliberation of social welfare policy” (2002, p. 82). While Asen (2002) indicates that Reagan was the turning point, it is not clear why his election was the turning point.

### Reagan and Politics of Reconstruction

In his examination of presidential leadership, Stephen Skowronek (1997) argues that “*the presidency is a governing institution inherently hostile to inherited governing arrangements*” (p. 20). This is especially true for new presidents because “[t]hey would assert that their election proceeded on the dislike of the current state of affairs; and, acting on that authority, they would be likely to try to change as much about it as they could” (Skowronek, 1997, p. 21). Because of this, Skowronek claims “*the power to recreate order hinges on the authority to repudiate it*. The recurrent patterns of presidential politics are anchored in this paradox. The authority to repudiate is the most formidable of all political resources for the exercise of leadership” (1997, p. 27). Therefore, presidential authority and power is largely determined by and most potent when, it can legitimately decry the previous administrations.

Building on this position, Skowronek developed “Recurrent Structures of Presidential Authority” (1997, p. 36). Skowronek identifies four structures for presidential action: politics of reconstruction, politics of disjunction, politics of articulation, and politics of preemption (1997, p. 36). Historically, during times of the politics of reconstruction, “A great opportunity for presidential action was harnessed at these moments to an expansive authority to repudiate the established governing formulas” (Skowronek, 1997, p. 37). Additionally, “when government has been most thoroughly discredited, and when political resistance to the presidency is weakest,

presidents tend to remake the government wholesale” (Skowronek, 1997, p. 37).

Presidents during times of the politics of reconstruction have the most authority to repudiate and, consequently, have the most power to reshape political order.

Reagan was able to claim the authority and power granted by the politics of reconstruction; as Skowronek notes, “He came to power in circumstances that recalled the great reconstructive crusades of the past” (1997, p. 414). Because of this, Reagan was “thrust to commanding heights by Carter’s floundering” and “wielded his repudiative authority to reconstruct the standards of legitimate political action” (Skowronek, 1997, p. 57). Reagan came to the presidency with the authority to repudiate previous administrations and the power to reshape political order.

However, before a president can begin to wield the political power given to him, as Skowronek notes, a president must construct a narrative:

The first thing a [president] does is to situate himself in a public discourse, and construct a narrative relating what has been done previously to what he proposes to do in the moment at hand. The basic parameters of politics are set here, in the president’s initial assertions about who he is and where he sees himself fitting into the nation’s history.

To sustain his narrative—to confirm during the exercise of his powers his own presentments about his place in history—a president must be able to preempt the authority of others to challenge what is being done and how it is being accomplished. Concrete policy accomplishments are important to the leader’s prospects in this regard, as are personal setbacks and defeats, but they are important only insofar as they bear on the story being told. (1997, p. 24)

Therefore, the narrative presidents construct is central to the politics they make, and the narratives the presidents of the politics of reconstruction create hold the most authority because they can repudiate previous administrations.

By viewing Reagan as a president of reconstruction, it is clear why his election was the turning point in poverty deliberation, discussion, and discourse; he had the political authority to reshape government. Furthermore, because the narrative a president constructs is central to his authority and power, an examination of the narrative constructed in Reagan's poverty discourse is appropriate.

### The Narrative Paradigm

Walter R. Fisher (1984) developed the narrative paradigm as “a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme” (p. 2). From this stance, judgments about the quality of discourse cannot be made by looking entirely at “informal or formal logic” (Fisher, 1984, p. 2). Examining the logic and appropriateness of arguments made in discourse falls under what Fisher calls “the rational world paradigm” (1984, p. 4). Unfortunately, as Fisher argues, the rational world paradigm fails to accurately critique when “argument is most general and most obviously concerned with values” or what he calls “moral public argument” (p. 5). Therefore, the development of the narrative paradigm resulted from this failure of the rational world paradigm.

As previously stated, the narrative paradigm goes beyond looking exclusively at the logic of human communication. The narrative paradigm examines the stories embedded in discourse (Fisher, 1984, 1985). “[H]uman communication”, Fisher states, “should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories competing with other

stories constituted by good reasons, as being rational when they satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements” (p.2). Guiding this view of human communication is the principle that humans are storytellers who make decisions based on historically and culturally determined “good reasons” that are judged as being rational according to narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and these stories and the “good reasons” that support them shape social reality (Fisher, 1984, p. 7-8). From this view of human communication, rhetorical criticism should focus on standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity instead of formal and informal logic. Furthermore, rhetorical criticism is concerned with the features of narrative probability and fidelity because these features make “one story better than another” (Fisher, 1984, p. 16).

Narrative probability refers to the coherence of a story (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). It is “the consistency of characters and actions, the accommodation of auditors, and so on” (Fisher, 1984, p. 16). For Fisher, narrative probability consists of the “formal features” of the story, and judgment of a story is determined by how it “hangs together” or “whether or not a story is free of contradictions” (1985, p. 349). More specifically, judgments of narrative probability are determined by “coherence, consistency, and noncontradiction” and “depend on a comparison and contrast with prior, accepted stories” (Fisher, 1985, p. 364).

Narrative fidelity asks “whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). It is “a matter of truth according to the doctrine of correspondence” (Fisher, 1984, p. 16). In other words, how is the story consonant with what the audience already knows? Consonance or narrative

fidelity is determined by “the logic of good reasons” (Fisher, 1985, p. 349). Good reasons can include, but is not limited to formal and informal logic (Fisher, 1985, p. 350). Good reasons can also include any number of value judgments or an adherence to metaphors and myths (Fisher, 1985, p. 350, 357). Narrative probability and narrative and fidelity determine narrative rationality (Fisher, 1984, 1985). Consequently, critical examination of narrative rationality embedded in discourse is essential because “*good stories function in two ways: to justify (or mystify) decisions or actions already made or performed and to determine future decisions or actions*” (Fisher, 1985, p. 362).

### Reagan and Narrative Rationality

According to Lewis (1987), the narrative paradigm is central to understanding Reagan’s discourse. Lewis explains the centrality of narrative to his presidency, “Reagan’s message is a story. Reagan uses story-telling to direct his policies, ground his explanations, and inspire his audiences” (1987, p. 281). In the development of his narrative, Reagan tells two types of stories (Lewis, 1987, p. 281). First, “*Anecdotes* define the character of an issue at the same time that they illustrate, reinforce, and make his policies and ideas more vivid” (Lewis, 1987, p. 281-2). Anecdotes are simple stories with a “clear message to those whose experience leads them to accept the story as either true or as true-to-life and whose values lead them to accept the moral” (Lewis, 1987, p. 282). Second, “*Myth* structures his message” and “informs all of Reagan’s rhetoric” (Lewis, 1987, p. 282). Myths provide an impetus for action for the individual by telling the stories of the origin and destiny of a particular society (Lewis, 1987, p. 282).

In telling America’s story through the use of anecdotes and myths, Lewis claims Reagan’s narrative does the following:

Reagan's story encourages his audience to see America as a chosen nation leading the world to freedom and economic progress, to see Reagan as a friendly, well-motivated leader and as a narrator of the American story, and to see themselves as heroes in the unfolding drama of American greatness. In Reagan's rhetoric, the nature of the world, his policies, his values, his character, and the character of his audience are defined together. (Lewis, 1987, p. 287)

There is a significant consequence to Reagan's story of America: "*Reagan's exclusive and explicit reliance on a single story has dominated the realm of political judgment*" (Lewis, 1987, p. 288). In the arena of public policy, Reagan's narrative rationality has prevailed (Lewis, 1987, p. 288).

Fisher's (1987) narrative criticism of Reagan's story is consonant with Lewis's (1987). "Reagan's story" Fisher claims, "is grounded in American history and it is informed by central values of the American Dream" (1987, p. 146). Reagan's character "is constituted by this background and renders him virtually immune to 'rational' criticism" (Fisher, 1987, p. 146). Reagan's "implied audience of heroes in his rhetoric is efficacious as just about any that one might conceive" (Fisher, 1987, p. 146).

According to Fisher (1987), Reagan's discourse prevails even though it "fails the tests of the rational-world paradigm and the tests of narrative fidelity" (p. 155). In other words, Reagan's discourse does not pass the test of good reasons. The discourse prevails because of the strength of its coherence and consistency "with the story of America", "his character", and "the compatibility of his image with that of his constituency" (Fisher, 1987, p. 156). Furthermore, Fisher argues that Reagan's discourse "will remain viable as

long as historical circumstances permit, as long as there is not an equally compelling story and character to confront it and show its ultimate lack of coherence” (1987, p. 156).

#### Welfare Reform and Narrative Rationality

Gring-Pemle (2001) analyzed Congressional hearings and debates concerned with welfare reform that led to the passage of PRWORA to gain “insight into the rhetorical processes by which social policy is formulated” (p. 342). Gring-Pemle found that narratives of welfare recipients and their families “facilitate elite discourse, discourage the inclusion of alternative public views, and delegitimize particular public voices” (2001, p. 343). In other words, the narrative can reify the politics that Fisher sought to undermine with his development of narrative rationality (Gring-Pemle, 2001).

Specifically, Gring-Pemle claims that the depictions of welfare recipients and their families guided judgments of narrative probability and narrative fidelity (2001, p. 344). Gring-Pemle (2001) identified “three rhetorical depictions of welfare recipients” (p. 347). First, Gring-Pemle identified “the misfortunate” as “those individuals who experience an unexpected misfortune or circumstance and require short-term assistance” (2001, p. 347). Second, Gring-Pemle identified “the feckless” who were depicted as having “poor values” and, consequently, “choices prevent the feckless welfare recipient from rising out of poverty” (2001, p. 349). It should be noted, this depiction was the dominant depiction in the debates and hearings (Gring-Pemle, 2001, p. 349). Third, the debates and hearings depicted “welfare mothers as predominately immature youth” (Gring-Pemle, 2001, p. 353). From all three of these depictions, policy initiatives developed (Gring-Pemle, 2001, p. 355-8, Gring-Pemle, 2003, p. 476).

In another study, Gring-Pemble (2003) notes the pervasiveness and power of stories and depictions of welfare recipients during hearings and debates concerned with welfare. In conjunction with disparaging stories and depictions of welfare recipients, were anecdotes which support the “Mythical Family Ideal” or the traditional nuclear family (Gring-Pemble, 2003, p. 476-7). These rhetorical constructions served “as evidence to support legislative proposals and policies designed to enforce marriage, paternal economic support, and material dependence” (Gring-Pemble, 2003, p. 476). Throughout the debates, these rhetorical constructions prevailed, despite “significant evidence” that ultimately undermined the veracity of the stories, depictions, and anecdotes (Gring-Pemble, 2003, p. 490).

### **Methodology**

Because of his significance in the history of the welfare policy debate (Asen, 2002), this study will examine Reagan’s poverty discourse. More specifically, this study will examine the narrative rationality embedded in his poverty discourse. Because judgments of narrative rationality are determined by narrative probability and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1984, 1985), this study will critically examine the coherence of his poverty discourse and good reasons that constitute narrative fidelity. It is important to examine the coherence and consistency of the narrative because, as Fisher (1987) indicates, the coherence and consistency of Reagan’s narrative are the reasons why his narrative prevails.

Furthermore, informed by previous research, this study will examine specific themes within the narrative of Reagan’s poverty discourse. From this research, the following questions will guide the examination. First, how does Reagan’s narrative of

poverty repudiate the regimes that preceded his presidency? Second, how does Reagan use anecdotes and myths within his narrative of poverty? Third, does Reagan's narrative of poverty meet standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity? Finally, does Reagan's narrative of poverty inform the depictions and anecdotes that led to the passage of PRWORA?

This study will examine all discourse related to poverty and the welfare system in the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan*. This will include, but is not limited to Reagan's discourse on poverty and welfare during press conferences, speeches before Congress, Inauguration speeches, speeches broadcast on television, and any other significant communication relating to poverty and welfare. The texts will be identified by auditing the indexes of the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan*. However, to limit the number of texts examined, this study will only examine discourse related to poverty and the welfare system during Reagan's first four years as president. This is justifiable because, as Skowronek (1997) notes, the presidents construct their narrative in the beginning to set the "parameters of politics" (p. 24). Furthermore, Reagan's poverty and welfare discourse prior to his taking office will not be included. The purpose of this study is to examine Reagan's discourse as a *president*.

The analysis of Reagan's poverty discourse will develop in the following way: First, it will examine Reagan's story of welfare system and the welfare system in justifying his plan for economic recovery. Second, it will examine Reagan's story of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Third, it will examine Reagan's poverty discourse in justifying his economic policies after the implementation of the plan for

economic. In all of the following chapters, this study will determine whether or not the depictions and anecdotes constructed by Reagan were influential to the passage of PRWORA; in other words, is Reagan's rhetorical construction similar to the construction described by Gring-Pemble (2001, 2003) and Asen (2002).

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Reconstructing Poverty Discourse through Economic Recovery**

#### Reagan's Proposal on February 18, 1981

When Reagan first assumed the Office of President he introduced a plan for economic recovery. Reagan outlined and justified his plan for economic recovery in a speech on February 18, 1981, before a joint session of Congress and a national television and radio audience. In this speech, Reagan identifies two main economic problems, inflation and unemployment, that justify the need for economic recovery to the American worker. First, he identifies “the punishing inflation which has for the first time in 60 years held to double-digit figures for 2 years in a row” (Reagan, 1982, p. 109). Reagan makes inflation significant to workers with the following anecdote, “One worker in a Midwest city put it to me this way: He said, ‘I am bringing home more dollars than I ever believed I could possibly earn, but I seem to be getting worse off.’ And he is” (Reagan, 1982, 109). This is consistent with Asen’s (2002) claim that Reagan associated himself with the “individual worker” (p. 88), but what is additionally important is that Reagan specifically implicates inflation as hurting the individual worker.

Second, Reagan implicates unemployment as undermining economic growth and productivity. Specifically, he indicates the despair caused by unemployment combined with high inflation:

Almost 8 million Americans are out of work. These are people who want to be productive. But as the months go by, despair dominates their lives. The threats of

layoff and unemployment hang over other millions, and all who work are frustrated by their inability to keep up with inflation. (Reagan, 1982, p. 109)

Under the scenario presented by Reagan, there are Americans many out of work and suffering through no fault of their own, and those that are fortunate to keep a job are hurt by the rate of inflation and experience a growing fear of losing their jobs. Furthermore, Reagan explains that these problems have been compounded by the increase in taxes on the American family, “Federal personal taxes for the average family have increased 67 percent” (Reagan, 1982, p. 109)

By explaining how the American worker is feeling the effects of inflation and unemployment, Reagan justifies his plan for economic recovery. He then begins to present and justify a four-part plan for economic recovery to solve for the problems of inflation and unemployment:

This plan is aimed at reducing the growth in government and taxing, reforming and eliminating regulations which are unnecessary and unproductive or counterproductive, and encouraging a consistent monetary policy aimed at maintaining the value of currency. If enacted in full, this program can help America create 13 million new jobs, nearly 3 million more than we would have without these measures. It will also help us gain control of inflation. (Reagan, 1982, p. 109)

Because Reagan would call for reduction spending on social program, specifically programs that provided benefits for the poor, the following analysis will examine Reagan’s rhetorical construction of welfare recipients and the welfare system to support

reductions in government spending on social programs within the narrative of economic recovery.

In justifying the reductions in social spending, in his speech on February 18, 1981, Reagan made it clear that he would not cut programs that benefited deserving individuals. Specifically, he noted:

We will continue to fulfill the obligations that spring from our national conscience. Those who, through no fault of their own, must depend on the rest of us—the poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need—can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts. (Reagan, 1982, p. 110)

However, Reagan also makes it clear, “government will not continue to subsidize individuals [...] where real need cannot be demonstrated” (Reagan, 1982, p. 110).

Specifically, Reagan claims the government can “save \$1.8 billion in fiscal year 1982 by removing from eligibility those who are not in real need or who are abusing” the Food Stamp program (1982, p. 111). Reagan also promised to “tighten welfare and give more attention to outside sources of income when determining the amount of welfare that an individual is allowed” (1982, p. 111), and he would couple this plan with “strong and effective work requirements” to save \$520 million.

In other words, individuals that can demonstrate a need are deserving of the social safety net already in place, and individuals that cannot demonstrate a need will lose the benefits they currently receive. Therefore, any cut in social programs is automatically justified. If an individual loses his or her benefits as a result of Reagan proposed cuts,

then he or she did not the benefits anyway because there was no evidence of a “true need” or he or she was abusing the system.

Additionally, by claiming that recipients of Food Stamps and welfare are receiving benefits that are not needed and/or are abusing the programs, Reagan associates recipients of government programs to what he calls “the general problem of waste and fraud in the Federal Government” (1982, p. 112). If welfare and Food Stamp recipients are receiving benefits they do not need or abusing the programs, then, at the very least, they are wasting government appropriations, if not committing fraud. Moreover, Reagan cites one estimate that indicates “that fraud alone may account for anywhere from 1 to 10 percent—as much as \$25 billion of Federal expenditures for social programs” (1982, p. 112). In his discussion of waste and fraud, Reagan only mentioned government outlays on social program.

Lastly, in his presentation of the plan for economic recovery on February 18, 1981, Reagan employs two significant strategies. First, he preempts those that would challenge his proposal, and second, he explains that what has been done before he came to office will fail. Specifically, Reagan notes:

I’m sure there’ll be some who raise the old familiar 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? (1982, p. 114)

He continues:

The taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government 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 that it doesn't work. (Reagan, 1982, p. 114)

These strategies are significant, because as Skowronek (1997) claims, before a president can use the political power given to him, he must construct a narrative that first explains what has been done before and what he proposes to do, and the narrative must preempt any challenges to the president's authority (p. 24). Reagan situates himself in poverty discourse by claiming previous poverty policies to create social change have failed; therefore, cuts to what he feels are failed social programs are justified. He also situates himself in poverty discourse by preempting challenges to his authority, by claiming he will not cut programs for the truly needy. This narrative is particularly effective because, as Skowronek (1997) notes Reagan could claim the authority and power of the politics of reconstruction (p. 414).

As Fisher (1987) notes, the strength of Reagan's entire narrative is its coherence and consistency or narrative probability (p. 155-6). The coherence and consistency of his plan for economic recovery is strong as well. Reagan explains the crisis facing the individual worker and American family. Workers are negatively affected by inflation and unemployment. These adverse conditions are compounded by the increasing tax burden on the American family. The individual worker and the American family are innocent victims of current economic conditions. To end this victimization, Reagan proposes a plan for economic recovery. Central to this plan is cutting government spending, specifically spending on social programs. This new approach is needed

because the old ones have failed. Cutting these programs is justified for two reasons. First, social programs are responsible for waste and fraud in the Federal Government. Second, only those that either do not need the programs or abuse the programs will be affected. In Reagan's narrative of economic recovery, the non-needy and the abusers of government programs are the culprits. The narrative is coherent because it has victims, victimizers, and a new way to end the victimization. Moreover, by pitting one group against another, welfare recipients become the scapegoat for economic problems, and the welfare system (social spending) becomes the sacrificial lamb in the story of economic recovery.

However, despite the coherence of the narrative of economic recovery and the role of welfare recipients and the welfare system within the narrative, the role of the recipients and the role of the system as culprits would be subject to challenge. In other words, the narrative meets standards of probability, but it is not clear that the narrative meets standards of narrative fidelity. This is evidenced by Reagan having to defend the logic of the cutting social programs in the plan for economic recovery.

#### Responding to Challenges

In a question-and-answer session on the plan for economic recovery on February 19, 1981, Reagan defends reduction in spending on social programs, specifically welfare. Drawing from his experience as Governor of California, Reagan again implicates the welfare in weakening the economy:

[P]art of my confidence in [...] what we can do is based on what we did in California. We finally realized that all the savings we were making, all the

economies, were all being eaten by welfare. And in good times and bad it bore no relation to the economy.

We saw that welfare in California was reaching a point of an increase of as much as 40,000 cases a month being added to the welfare rolls. We finally turned the task force loose to come back with a plan for reforming welfare. (Reagan, 1982, p. 135)

Reagan continues by implicating the welfare system and its inability to determine the actual number of people on welfare:

[N]o one in the United States knows how many people are on welfare. They only know how many checks they're sending out, and then we turn up a woman in Chicago that's getting checks under 127 different names. And just recently in Pasadena, California, living in a lovely home there, a woman was brought in and charged with collecting \$300,000 in a welfare scheme. (Reagan, 1982, p. 135)

In defending reductions in spending on social programs, Reagan clearly uses an anecdote. As stated earlier, anecdotes are simple stories with a "clear message to those whose experience leads them to accept the story as either true or as true-to-life and whose values lead them to accept the moral" (Lewis, 1987, p. 282). Again, anecdotes define the nature of an issue (Lewis, 1987, p. 281-2). In this scenario, Reagan tells a story that defines nature of the welfare system and welfare recipients and justifies retrenchment of the welfare system. The welfare system disrupts economies and is fundamentally flawed; it is so flawed that individuals are able to cheat the system.

Reagan goes further to justify welfare reform by explain the success he had in reforming welfare in California:

[W]e saved over a 3-year period, because the welfare reforms went in only in my last 3 years—we saved \$2 billion for the California tax-payers in the program.

The rolls were reduced by more than 350,000 people without us actually throwing anyone off. They just disappeared, and over and above that we had enough to increase the welfare grants to the deserving needy who remained by an average of 43 percent. (Reagan, 1982, p. 136)

Again, using this anecdote from his experience accomplishes four things. First, by explaining how reforming the program saved California taxpayers billions, Reagan clarifies how individuals receiving public assistance hurt the individual worker. In other words, Reagan provides specific evidence of the welfare recipient hurting the individual worker. Second, the anecdote implies that mismanagement and abuse is widespread in the welfare system. By stating that the individuals just disappeared, Reagan implies that individuals could have been receiving more than one check and that without reform, the welfare system is unable determine who is receiving the checks. Third, reforming and reducing welfare does not hurt the truly needy. Reform freed funds for the truly needy. Fourth, and most important, it suggests that welfare reform is successful, achievable, and humane. Reform and reductions in social spending have worked in the past and these previous reforms did not hurt what Reagan calls the “deserving needy”. Again, Reagan tells an anecdote based on his experience that defines and characterizes reductions in social spending as a sound and humane policy that is central to economic recovery.

In a news conference on March 6, 1981, when asked how poor people will survive the cuts in social spending, Reagan again used almost the same anecdote based on his

experience as Governor of California; however this time he indicates that the reduction was due to cheaters being caught:

We never had a single case of anyone suddenly appearing and saying, “I am destitute. I’ve been cut off welfare.” As a matter of face, most of those people disappeared of their own free will, which led us to believe that under regulations which bound us in our administrative ability, we were unable to really pin down how many people might be getting more than one welfare check. And when they just disappeared as the spotlight began to be turned on, possibly out of recognition that they were now going to be caught, the rolls just shrank. And it’s this theory that’s behind what we are doing. (Reagan, 1982, p. 208)

Again, Reagan is able to use the anecdote to “illustrate, reinforce, and make his policies and ideas more vivid” (Lewis, 1987, p. 281-2). Additionally, as Asen (2002) notes, “Reagan construed this silence as irrefutable proof” (p. 97). If anyone is hurt by the policies of the administration, it is the individuals that hurt the system and the individual worker.

Reagan would employ this anecdote again in a question-and-answer session with Congressional Women on the plan for economic recovery on March 16, 1981.

Representative Cardiss Collins of Illinois expressed reservations about the spending cuts, “But I’m very concerned about those people who are recipients of AFDC, who are children that cannot speak out for themselves” (Reagan, 1982, p. 251). Reagan told the story of the success in California; however this time he added:

And I think you’re going to find that—well, I have to say that I think that some of the purveyors of these programs, the dispensers of the programs are more worried

about losing their position than they are about the people they represent. And they're trying to create an image that we are picking on the poor, because they don't want to lose their clientele and possibly their position. (Reagan, 1982, p. 251)

Reagan extends on the anecdote by characterizing those that decry the administration's policies as individuals that are not poor that are afraid of losing their job. In other words, this addition to the anecdote casts doubt on the credibility of those that oppose cuts in social spending.

#### Assessing Narrative Fidelity in Reagan's Response

Reagan was able to get the reduction in Federal spending that he wanted. On September 24, 1981, Reagan again spoke to the about his plan for economic recovery to a national television and radio audience. Reagan noted that a "bipartisan coalition" had enacted the "greatest reduction in Federal spending in our nation's history" (Reagan, 1982, p. 831). Ultimately, Reagan's discourse was successful in that legislators passed a large reduction in Federal spending which was part of the plan for economic recovery. However, does this mean that Reagan's narrative passes the "logic of good reasons"?

Again, the anecdote served to make Reagan's policy more vivid; however, it is important to note that the anecdote functions by creating specific depictions. First, the California case is depicted as a success to the taxpayer and the "deserving needy". In the anecdote, the strategy in California worked. Second, the California anecdote depicted a welfare system in which waste was prevalent before reforms were made. Third, the California anecdote depicted welfare recipients as cheats and frauds. Fourth, the anecdote depicts those that question the rationality of cutting social spending as

government officials that are afraid of losing their jobs and do not have a real concern for the people that receive assistance. The depictions in the California anecdote presented by Reagan serve as “good reasons” for the reduction in welfare. As Gring-Pemble (2001) notes, “depictions serve as evidence for audiences to determine both narrative probability and narrative fidelity” (p. 344). Additionally, by referencing the case in California, Reagan is able to establish the “truth according to the doctrine of correspondence” (Fisher, 1984, p. 16). The measures to be taken in the plan for economic recovery correspond with what Reagan claims to be the successful California case.

### Summary and Conclusions

Reagan was able to reconstruct poverty discourse through his plan for economic recovery. As Asen (2002) notes, the end of the 1970s “saw the end of the post-war boom that threatened the economic standing of many Americans previously propelled into prosperity by this very boom” (p. 71). Aware of this, Reagan proposed a plan for economic recovery. The narrative of economic recovery presented by Reagan had clear victims (the individual worker) and clear perpetrators (government spending, specifically spending on programs that does not serve the “truly needy”).

This narrative was challenged because of a fear that those currently receiving public assistance would lose their benefits and become destitute. However, Reagan responded to this challenge by presenting an anecdote of the California case which included the depictions necessary to meet the “doctrine of correspondence” and the “logic of good reasons”, because the depictions implicated the undeserving poor. Reagan was able to meet the standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

It is significant to note that there was not a challenge to implicating social spending on the whole as the culprit for decreased economic growth. It is quite possible that this is a result of Reagan's power to repudiate the policies of the past. Reagan was able to link social spending to the failed policies of the past. Because Reagan was the beneficiary of the politics of reconstruction, he was not challenged on his power to reshape political order.

On September 24, 1981, Reagan also called for "additional reductions in Federal spending that will help lower out interest rates, our inflation, and bring us closer to full economic recovery" (Reagan, 1982, p. 831). This reduction in Federal spending would include "a new package of entitlement and welfare reform measures" (Reagan, 1982, p. 833), and again, Reagan justified the reform measures by presenting the anecdote of his experience with the California welfare system and stressed, "We can be compassionate about human needs without being complacent about budget extravagance" (Reagan, 1982, p. 834). Not only did he justify the cuts with California anecdote, but he justified future cuts with the same anecdote, preempting any challenges. The anecdote had become a stock rhetorical strategy in reducing welfare.

Additionally, within Reagan's narrative of economic recovery, he identifies "[t]hose who, through no fault of their own must depend on the rest of us—the poverty stricken" (1982, p. 110). This statement indicates a link between Reagan's depiction of the poor and depictions of the identified by Gring-Pemble (2001). Specifically, legislators during the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) debates constructed an image of the "misfortunate welfare recipient" that faced "unanticipated circumstances outside of their control such as

personal disasters” (Gring-Pemble, 2001, p. 347-8). Regan’s depiction of the individuals deserving public assistance and the “misfortunate” depiction during the PRWORA debates both viewed some recipients of public assistance as deserving the benefits they received.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Reconstructing Poverty Discourse through Federalism Legislation**

Reagan also reconstructs poverty through Federalism legislation that proposed to have State governments assume control of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the food stamps program in exchange for the Federal Government assume control of Medicaid. Although this proposal failed to reach the Congressional floor, his presentation of the proposal to exchange AFDC and food stamp program with Medicaid altered poverty discourse. It made poverty a local concern, which influenced the welfare legislation in the mid-1990s, and his discourse would pit spending on social programs against national defense.

#### State of the Union Address January 26, 1982

In his State of the Union Address on January 26, 1982, Reagan continues his efforts to reshape political order. The first phase of reshaping political order was to increase economic growth through the plan for economic recovery. The second phase of reshaping political order was to give control of federal programs to state governments. First, Reagan restates the importance of his plan for economic recovery in simulating growth and protecting the “truly needy”, “the economic program we’ve put into operation will protect the needy while it triggers a recovery that will benefit all Americans” (Reagan, 1983a, p.75). Second, Reagan states the next phase in reshaping political order, “our next major undertaking must be a program—just as bold, just as innovative—to

make government accountable to the people, to make our system of federalism work again” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 75).

In proposing this new legislation, Reagan explains how the federal government and control has become extremely excessive:

Our citizens feel they’ve lost control of even the most basic decisions made about essential services of government, such as schools, welfare, roads, and even garbage collection. And they’re right. A maze of interlocking jurisdictions and levels of government confronts average citizens in trying to solve even the simplest of problems. They don’t know where to turn for answers, who to hold accountable, who to praise, who to blame, who to vote against. The main reason for this is the overpowering growth of Federal grants-in-aid programs during the past few decades. (Reagan, 1983a, p. 75)

In this passage, Reagan tells a story in which the “average citizen” mired in a system of government where needs cannot be met. Additionally, “Federal grant-in-aid programs” become the culprit for the pinch felt by the “average citizen”.

Earlier in the speech, Reagan indicated that the priority of Federal Government is maintaining two things: “a strong national defense” and “a reliable safety net of social programs” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 74). Reagan explains how trying to oversee the grants-in-aid programs interfere with these priorities:

You know and I know that neither the President nor the Congress can properly oversee this jungle of grants-in-aid; indeed, the growth of these grants has led to the distortion in the vital functions of government. As one Democratic Governor

put it recently: The National Government should be worrying about “arms control, not pot holes.” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 76)

In Reagan’s narrative of the problems of increased federal control interferes with national priorities outline by Reagan. The fundamental national priorities, the President, and Congress are all victims of the grants-in-aid program. These reasons justify Reagan’s plan to “return some \$47 billion in Federal programs to State and local government,” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 76).

Fundamental to the legislation is a swap of programs between the Federal Government and state governments:

Starting in fiscal 1984, the Federal Government will assume full responsibility for the cost of the rapidly growing Medicaid program to go along with its existing responsibility for Medicare. As part of the financially equal swap, the States will simultaneously take full responsibility for Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps. This will make welfare less costly and more responsive to genuine need, because it’ll be designed and administered closer to the grassroots and people it serves. (Reagan, 1983a, p. 76)

By federalizing Medicaid and devolving AFDC and food stamps, Reagan essentially places the AFDC and food stamps outside the realm of national and/or federal priorities. It also places the recipients and beneficiaries of these programs outside the realm of national priority.

Reagan’s narrative of federalism in the State of the Union Address describes a system that is out of control. The Federal Government has assumed responsibility for too many programs. The “average citizen”, national priorities (national defense and the

safety net of social programs), Congress, and the President are all negatively affected by this system that is out of control. Getting the Federal Government back to its national priorities is to devolve control of AFDC and food stamps to the states because the states would be best at administering these programs. Again, Reagan advances a narrative that has clear victims and clear culprits (grants-in-aid programs, specifically AFDC and food stamps).

By advancing a narrative with clear victims and culprits, the story “hangs together” (1985, p. 349) with “consistency of characters” (Fisher, 1984, p. 16); therefore, the story meets the standard of narrative probability. Furthermore, the probability of this narrative is enhanced by two factors. First, it is consistent with the “prior, accepted” story (Fisher, 1985, p. 364) of economic recovery. Giving the states responsibility of AFDC and food stamps is consistent with plan for economic recovery’s goals to reduce federal spending and regulations. Second, Reagan enhances the coherence of the story by explaining that he will propose the plan to Congress “only after close consultation with congressional, State, and local officials” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 76). This adds to the coherence of the narrative because it gives state and local governments a say in the legislation, rather than the having the Federal Government pass legislation without concern for the state and local government. By consulting with state and local government, Reagan is already giving some power back to the states.

Because Reagan would only propose Federalism legislation to Congress after consulting state and local governments, this chapter will examine the speeches Reagan made to various state and local governments that makes the case to devolve AFDC and

food stamps. The subsequent section will assess the narrative fidelity and reassess the narrative probability of Reagan's Federalism proposal.

#### Presenting the Proposal at the State and Local Levels

In an interview with reporters in Bloomington, Minnesota, on the Federalism proposal, on February 8, 1982, reporters question the workability of the Federalism program and the burden it will place on the states (Reagan, 1983a, p. 142). Reagan responds and justifies the rationale of the plan:

There are going to be no winners and no losers in this. We're going to transfer the funds that are necessary to perform the programs. And the trade that we proposed, of the Federal Government taking Medicaid and in return them taking food stamps and the Aid to Dependent Children, was because the increase in spending on Medicaid is several times greater than the increase in those other programs. So, the Federal Government, by taking that program on, is going to relieve the States of an increased burden (Reagan, 1983a, p. 142)

In Reagan's response, the proposal is no longer a financially equal swap. The Federal Government will be relieving the States of a burden. The States would benefit from the proposal; however, this seems to contradict the statement that there are no "winners" or "losers". The consistency and coherence of the narrative begins to wane in presenting the case to the states.

The reporters in Bloomington continued to question the workability of the program and explained that Republicans in Congress disagreed with the claim of a "financially equal swap". In response, Reagan claims, "Well, I don't think they fully understand yet" (Reagan, 1983a, p. 142). He justifies the proposal again, "we have been

meeting already with Governors, mayors, and so forth [...] this is something that for 30 years they've been begging for" (Reagan, 1983a, p. 142). Moreover, Reagan denounces naysayers as "Members of Congress who resist giving up authority and power" (Reagan, 1983a, p. 143). Again, the strength of the coherence of the narrative falters. In the State of the Union Address, Congress was a victim of the growth of the Federal Government. In this scenario, the willingness of members of Congress to support the Federalism proposal is a result of their desire for authority; they are now also culprits.

Speaking before the Iowa State Legislature on February 9, 1982, Reagan explains how federal authority has usurped local authority in areas of "fire protection, police pensions, welfare, and pothole repair" (Reagan, 1983a, p. 145). Again, Reagan stresses working with local and state governments, specifically the Iowa State Legislature, to develop a plan "to restore accountability now missing in our bloated government" (Reagan, 1983a, p. 146). Additionally, he states, "the centerpiece of the proposal is the almost dollar-for-dollar swap of two of the largest areas of welfare", Medicaid and AFDC and the food stamp program (Reagan, 1983a, p. 146). In two days, Reagan tells two different stories about the swap between federal and state government. The first story has the Federal Government relieving the states of a financial burden. The second story has a "dollar-for-dollar swap" between the two levels of government. At this point, the narrative of Reagan's Federalism proposal has inconsistencies, damaging narrative probability.

Additionally, in his speech to the Iowa State Legislature, Reagan continues to denounce those in Congress that oppose his proposal. However, this time he claims that they are the same individuals that denounced the plan for economic recovery:

First the elitists fought the tax cuts, saying the American people could not be trusted with an increased share of their own earnings. Now they say the people we elect to State and local office can't be trusted to run State and local affairs. Well then, who can we trust? A handful of individuals with a strong case of Potomac fever, the very individuals who got us into this mess to begin with? (Reagan, 1983a, p. 147)

In this passage is a clear depiction of those opposing Reagan's reforms, first, Reagan's opponents do not trust the American people. Second, Reagan's opponents do not trust local governments to handle local problems. Third, Reagan's opponents should not be trusted because they are culpable for the current crisis. Again, this contradicts the story in which Congress is a victim told in the State of the Union Address.

In a speech to the Indiana State Legislature, also on February 9, 1982, Reagan again denounces those that oppose his reforms as having their own political agenda, and responds to the challenge they present:

[T]here are those who for their own narrow political purposes say our federalism plan is a mere diversion from our economic problems, or that federalism is simply a means to cut the budget further. Well, don't you believe it. Our federalism plan stands on its own merits, a key to a freer, better America. Federalism is too important an issue to be treated as a distraction (Reagan, 1983a, p. 155)

Reagan continues and justifies the federalism proposal with an Indiana-specific metaphor, "The concept of federalism is like the green and gold quilt of Indiana crops. There is protection in variety. Well, there's protection in the quilt of the 50 States as well" (Reagan, 1983a, p. 156).

Reagan also presents his plan to swap control of Medicaid with AFDC and food stamps, but this time he again proposes it as a plan that benefits states, “The States will be picking up the areas where growth is much less rapid. Under current law, the total funding for AFDC and food stamps by 1987 compared with a projected 83-percent increase in the total cost of Medicaid for the same period” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 156). In this scenario, the Federal Government will assume financial burden of “the most rapidly growing social domestic needs” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 156). This story of the swap is not “dollar-for-dollar”.

In remarks made at the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors’ Town Meeting on March 3, 1982, Reagan again describes the swap as “the centerpiece of the federalism initiative” and claims it to be “almost dollar-for-dollar” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 259).

However, in the same speech, Reagan states that AFDC and the food stamp program “will grow at only about one-sixth the rate of the cost of Medicaid” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 259). Moreover, Reagan explains, “Our federalism program will have no losers. This is not an attempt to dump anything on the States and local governments”, and continues his denouncement of those “who suggest that State and local government can’t handle the responsibility” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 259). On the other hand, by having the Federal Government assume full responsibility of the cost of the larger Medicaid program, one could infer that Reagan does believe state and local government cannot handle the responsibility. Even if one does not infer this, there is still an inconsistency problem in Reagan’s narrative.

In a speech to the Alabama State Legislature March 15, 1982, Reagan again implies that he is relieving the states of the burden of the “rapidly growing Medicaid

program in exchange for the States picking up Aid to Families with Families with Dependent Children and food stamps” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 293). While this is inconsistent with the “dollar-for-dollar” swap story told earlier, it is also inconsistent with the evidence Reagan presented in the speech to justify the Federalism proposal:

David Broder of the Washington Post has said “... the contrast between the stumbling of the National Government and the improving performance of State and local government is a largely unreported story. Individual States have moved out ahead of the Federal Government ahead of the Federal Government, justifying again their claim to be ‘laboratories of democracy.’” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 293)

This is a compelling argument for giving state government more control and autonomy. However, the argument portrays the Federal Government as “stumbling”, which is not necessarily an endorsement of the Federal Government assuming full financial responsibility of a “rapidly growing” program.

Speaking before the Tennessee State Legislature, also March 15, 1982, again explains how the “Federal Government has become so bloated and fat that [‘Tennessee volunteer’ Andrew] Jackson wouldn’t recognize it” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 297). In explaining how this occurs Reagan says, “In the last 10 years, Federal spending has increased more than 300 percent [...] Medicaid and Medicare have gone up by more than 500 percent. Food stamps, in 15 years, have increased by 16,000 percent” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 298). These reasons justify the need for the Federalism proposal and what Reagan again calls the “centerpiece of the proposal [...] the almost dollar-for-dollar” swap of Medicaid for AFDC and food stamps (Reagan, 1983a, p. 298). In this scenario, with the reasons provided, the Federal Government would assume full financial

responsibility of a historically *slower* growing program. In this speech, Reagan did not state that the Federal Government would be relieving the states of a financial burden of the “rapidly growing” Medicaid.

The next day, in a speech delivered to the Oklahoma State Legislature, Reagan explains, “Our federalism plan is not airtight or infallible; it is designed to serve as a basis for discussion. We can certainly work out the details and meet the concerns that you may have” (Reagan, 1983a). While Reagan did state in the State of the Union Address that he would only make a proposal after he consulted others (specifically State and local governments and officials), by relegating the proposal to a “basis of discussion” Reagan cedes much of his power to reshape poverty policy through federalism. Additionally, by claiming that the proposal is “not airtight or infallible” the narrative becomes less cohesive. Opposition to the proposal is justified because even the individual that presented it concedes that it could have mistakes.

The plan to swap control of Medicaid with AFDC and food stamps changed. Speaking at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Counties in Baltimore, Maryland, on July, 13, 1982, Reagan states:

I have consulted with State and local officials as well as Members of the Congress [...] While we’ve remained true to our first principles, significant changes have been made. The new package calls for Federal assumption of Medicaid responsibilities in return for State takeover of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. But the food stamp program has been dropped from the swap. (Reagan, 1983b, p. 920)

Reagan also makes it clear that the change was due to opposition to and concern with the original proposal; he states that the changes “go along toward answering your needs” (Reagan, 1983b, p. 920).

### Reassessing Narrative Probability and Narrative Fidelity

At a purely instrumental level of analysis of Reagan’s narrative of federalism, the story of devolving control of AFDC and the food stamp program failed. On February 23, 1983, in a Message to Congress Transmitting Proposed Federalism Legislation, Reagan states, “The swap of federalization of Medicaid for State assumption of AFDC and Food Stamps, which was included in my January, 1982 framework has been dropped from the package” (Reagan, 1984a, p. 300). As the *Washington Post* reports, the plan “includes only \$21 billion in programs compared with the \$47 billion program proposed last year” (Williams, 1983 p. A3). The swap was not even sent to Congress. Why did the story fail at this level, especially if the proposal in the State of the Union was coherent? This question can be answered by reassessing the narrative probability and assessing narrative fidelity.

Especially important in determining narrative fidelity is “whether or not a story is free of contradictions” (1985, p. 349). In the State of the Union Address, the Reagan claims that Congress is a victim of the growth of the Federal Government because the growth made it impossible for the members to oversee the extensive legislation. However, after the plan was proposed, the *Washington Post* reported that Congress Members “strongly criticized” the plan because “it gave authority to local governments without providing sufficient funds” (Williams, 1983, p. A3). Reagan responded by

denouncing the opposition as individuals that only wanted to maintain their own power and as individuals that did not trust the average American, let alone local governments.

The *Washington Post* also reported that “local officials” had registered many of the same complaints made by Congresspersons (Williams, 1983, p. A3). In the State of the Union, Reagan presented the swap as “financially equal” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 76). When complaints were made about a lack of funding, Reagan decided to explain the proposal as a way to relieve a burden that was placed on the State and local government because the Federal Government would assume responsibility of the “rapidly growing” Medicaid. State governments would assume the cost and responsibility of the less expansive AFDC and food stamp programs. If Medicaid is expected to grow more rapidly, how could the swap be “financially equal”? The coherence of the story becomes lost. Moreover, when the swap is framed this way, the already expansive Federal Government, as Reagan claims, is going to assume control of the more expansive of the two programs. This is inconsistent with the goal of the proposal.

The story lacks the “coherence, consistency, and noncontradiction” necessary for a story to achieve narrative probability (Fisher, 1985, p. 364). Reagan’s rhetorical choices in response to opposition and realistic concerns in proposing to swap responsibilities of Medicaid, AFDC, and the food stamp program doomed the policy initiative, despite the coherence of the narrative presented in the State of the Union. While the victims and actions in the narrative failed to “hang together”, the justification for action remained a strong point of the story. The justification was, for the most part, consistent with Reagan’s accepted story of economic recovery in that the plan sought to limit the expansion of the federal government, the enemy of the economy in the previous

story. However, the consistency with accepted story of would undermine the narrative fidelity of the story.

As stated earlier, narrative fidelity asks: How is the story consonant with what the audience already knows? What does the audience already know? If the narrative of economic recovery is true, or at least regarded as accurate enough to pass legislation, then the audience knows at least two things about welfare. First, in the narrative of economic recovery, welfare programs, including AFDC and the food stamp program, are wrought with mismanagement. Agencies are unable to determine who is actually receiving the benefits of these programs. Second, many of the recipients of these benefits are the non-needy or cheaters that are bilking the programs. Even though the cuts to these programs were enacted, Reagan gives no indication that the mismanagement and fraud has ceased. Therefore, in Reagan's story of federalism legislation, he was essentially asking states to assume responsibility and funding of programs plagued by the problems of fraud and mismanagement.

The "logic of good reasons" also falters in another way. As the *Washington Post* reports, the plan proposed by Reagan in February of 1983, "includes only \$21 billion in programs compared with the \$47 billion program he proposed last year" (Williams, 1983, p. A3). If the Federal government was going to devolve programs to the States to save \$47 billion, then the States would have to either absorb the costs, or the programs. Again, this was the cause of complaint for local officials and members of Congress. Even though Reagan claimed the Federal Government would assume responsibility of the "rapidly growing" program, Medicaid, States would still have to pay for AFDC and the food stamp programs. Because Medicaid will grow faster than AFDC and food stamp

programs does not mean that AFDC and food stamps will be less costly, especially in the short term. Furthermore, in his proposal, Reagan justified scaling back federal programs with evidence that indicates food stamps have historically increased faster than Medicaid. Reagan gives no indication of how the “dollar-for-dollar” swap will benefit the States. This is reinforced by Reagan’s claim that the proposal is not “infallible”. State assuming responsibility of programs characterized as having fraud and mismanagement with no financial benefit does not fall into the category of “good reasons”.

Reagan’s narrative of Federalism Legislation to swap Medicaid with AFDC and food stamps fails does not pass the test of “good reasons” in some other ways. First, when he spoke to the Indiana State Legislature, Reagan indicated that turning programs over to the states means greater protection, but he does not elaborate on what this means. Second, when speaking to the Alabama State Legislature, he indicated that states are “laboratories of democracy”, but handing states AFDC and the food stamp programs is not the same as states having the freedom to experiment with different programs to see what works. Again, states would be handed broken programs, according to Reagan’s characterization of them in the narrative of economic recovery.

#### Summary and Conclusions

Even though this particular narrative of swapping AFDC with Medicaid fails tests of narrative probability and narrative fidelity and was omitted from the Federalism proposal, the failed narrative did work to reconstruct poverty discourse in two significant ways. First, it characterized welfare and, correspondingly poverty, as a local concern or problem. Reagan put welfare on the same level as clearly local issues like garbage collection. Moreover, by associating welfare with garbage collection and pot holes, the

narrative trivializes the nature of poverty. Poverty is put on the same level of concern as whether or not garbage is collected on time or properly. The Federal Government is absolved from the responsibility of providing assistance to the poor. Again, criticisms of the initiative were based on financial burdens the States would assume, not on the role of the Federal Government in providing for the poor. Additionally, even if welfare is a local concern for State and local governments and poverty better solved by those institutions, by asking the local governments to control programs that have been characterized as broken and/or failed, there is no real debate or discussion on who can best provide for the poor.

Additionally, while States did not assume control of AFDC, as Gring-Pemble (2001) discussed, the result of welfare legislation in 1996 was the replacement of AFDC with a “lump-sum payment (block grant) to states to create state-based welfare programs. This block grant became known as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)” (p. 347). In 1996 states did gain control of welfare systems with funding from the Federal Government. Therefore, the idea of state and local control of welfare advocated by Reagan was eventually adopted, but the TANF program provided the Federal funding that was the major point of contention in his Federalism proposal.

Second, by claiming that grants-in-aid programs, specifically AFDC and food stamps, interfere with the Federal Government’s focus and spending on national defense, Reagan can justify a policy of less butter and more guns. In Reagan’s narrative, assistance for the poor and other Federal programs is at odds with national defense. Reagan’s narrative of Federal legislation created the perception of zero-sum relationship between social spending/focus, specifically spending on the poor, and defense

spending/focus. Again, even if this is true, there was not a discussion. The opposition to the narrative rested entirely on the financial burden left to the states.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Reconstructing Poverty Discourse through Justification of Economic Policies**

In a question-and-answer session with reporters at a Fiscal Year 1983 budget signing ceremony on February 9, 1982, Reagan foreshadows his economic priorities after the implementation of the plan for economic recovery. Specifically, he explains the program will “try and bring government spending back in line with government’s revenues” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 119). Cutting social spending will be central to achieving Reagan’s goals, just as it was in the original proposal for economic recovery. Again, Reagan explains that the “programs are intended to direct the help toward the truly needy,” and “to tighten up administrative procedures wherein people who do not have real need have enjoyed the benefits of these programs” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 119). Reagan uses some new and old stories to justify this strategy.

#### Denouncing the Opposition

In the same question-and-session, Reagan responds to reporters who note stories presented by Democrats that claim that the poor are suffering and will suffer from his economic policies. He explains why these stories are appearing:

In times such as this—and I had previous experience as Governor with this happening—there are those out there in government [...] who will, if possible, sabotage and deliberately penalize some individual who actually is not supposed to be penalized in order to get a story indicating that the programs are not working. (Reagan, 1983a, p. 119)

Again, Reagan employs an anecdote from his experience as Governor of California, but in this instance, he argues that the welfare bureaucracy will try to make reform look bad. By doing so, Reagan leads the audience to believe the story he tells is true. At the same time, it defines the nature of stories that compete with his. In other words, Reagan through the use of this anecdote Reagan claims that the horror stories of the opposition are the result of the welfare bureaucracy.

This story is enhanced by repetitive characterizations or depictions of the opposition. In a news conference on March 31, 1982, Reagan refers to the opposition as “special-interest groups who have various [sic] of these programs as their particular interest” (Reagan, 1983a, p. 403). In other words, in Reagan’s narrative, the opposition has interests of their own in mind, not fiscal responsibility.

Reagan’s depiction of the opposition becomes even more inflammatory and repetitive. Reagan repeatedly refers to individuals or groups that claim the economic programs are hurting the poor as engaging in “political demagoguery” (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1338, 1643; 1985a, p. 463; 1985b, p. 1805). In Reagan’s narrative of the opposition, all claims of the unfairness of the policies were “begun and founded in or based in political demagoguery” (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1338). Moreover, the claims are “the most glaring example of political demagoguery” (Reagan, 1985a, p. 463), have “no facts” (Reagan 1984b, 1338), and are made “for political purposes” (Regan, 1984a, p. 1643). In other words, the claims of the opposition are without credibility and are not made because they represent the truth or because the individuals making the claims have a concern for the poor. In Reagan’s view and story, the opposition is using unwarranted claims to pander to the emotions of the audience.

Furthermore, if anyone in government was responsible for the poverty, it was the opposition and previous administration. At Republican Party rally in Omaha, Nebraska, on October 21, 1982, Reagan stated, “In 1980 government was growing like toadstools after a rainstorm, spinning out of control like a washing machine that was out of cycle. Washington and the bureaucracy were growing fatter and fatter while they were making everyone poorer and poorer” (Reagan, 1983b, p. 1367). In his narrative of the opposition, government was getting richer, while the poor were getting poorer; therefore, in denouncing the opposition, Reagan is able justify the need to reduce spending. He even notes the “trillion-dollar debt” caused by the opposition (Reagan, 1983b, p. 1367).

#### Criminalizing the Poor

In justifying his economic policies, Reagan claims that poor people are engaging in illegal activity, specifically with their use of food stamps. In the news conference on March 31, 1982, Bill Plante of CBS News asked Reagan the following in respect to new spending cuts:

Social security and other programs such as that have a large and voting constituency. But welfare programs, nutrition programs, food stamp programs, have a much smaller constituency. Your critics charge that proportionally larger cuts are being made there. How do you answer that? (Reagan, 1983a, p. 403)

Reagan responded with the following:

[W]e haven’t touched social security. Food stamps, over the last 15 years, increased 16,000 percent. And just recently we’ve been doing some investigating so that we can intelligently treat with [sic] a program of that kind. And we have found in the first investigation that 57 percent of the stores that were investigated

are selling items for food stamps that are banned, that food stamps are—it's illegal to use food stamps to buy those things. (Reagan, 1983a, p. 404)

The response did not address the fairness of cutting programs according to the recipients' political clout. Instead, Reagan justified the cuts by criminalizing the poor and those who serve them.

It should be noted that Reagan justified cuts to the food stamp program in another way. During an interview with reporters from the *Wall Street Journal* on February 3, 1984, Reagan explains:

Actually if there are individuals who suffer from our economic programs, they are people who've been dropped from various things like food stamps because they weren't morally eligible for them. Maybe some instances technically, but even in many cases, weren't even technically eligible for those programs. (Reagan, 1985a, p. 158)

Within his story, recipients of food stamps are either engaging in illegal activities or they are not “morally eligible” to receive the assistance. With these depictions of the recipients of public assistance, cutting the programs is justified. Social security is not “touched”, but by criminalizing the poor and claiming they are acting with moral turpitude, the poor are again the culprits in the story.

Additionally, Reagan's criminalization of the poor also creates tension between those Reagan deems as the needy and non-needy poor. This is clear in the following anecdote on food stamp abuse:

For example, I had a message the other day from a man in a small town down in Mississippi. And he was writing to me about food stamps in his area, because

there's a 31-percent unemployment rate in that particular town. And he was telling of some of the things, of people getting \$2,400 a month and receiving food stamps. Well, for them to do that means that someone else who really has need for them is being cheated and is not being able to get the help that they should have. (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1643)

This anecdote, again, justifies cuts to the program, but it also pits the needy and non-needy poor against one another. Not only are the criminals and “morally ineligible” hurting the economy on the whole, they are hurting what Reagan would call the “truly needy”.

### The Problem of Dependency

In a speech delivered to the American Bar Association on August 1, 1983, Reagan justifies the reduction in social spending on the poor in another way. He explains that there has been “[n]o overall improvement” in alleviating poverty “when government spending in the name of the poor was exploding” (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1114-5). Reagan continues, “[B]etween 1971 and 1980, the percentage of American households dependent on welfare rose by 20 percent” (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1115). The problem, as explained, gets even worse:

This tragedy was accompanied by the increasing breakdown of families. Nearly half of all poor families in 1980 were headed by women, and the number of single teenage mothers is estimated to have grown by 50 percent in the decade of the seventies. The dramatic increase was clearly associated with a change in the nature of public assistance. The emphasis shifted from F.D.R.'s model of direct payments to the needy. We began supporting a growing army of professionals. I

don't question their good intentions, but their economic self-interest lay in extending dependency, not in ending it. (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1115)

In this scenario, welfare not only fails, but it creates a system of dependency. Recipients become dependent on welfare, and administrators only add to this dependency.

In a radio address to the nation on the American family on December 3, 1983, Reagan explains the negative effects created by single mothers dependent on welfare. Specifically, he notes, "Too often their children grow up poor, malnourished, and lacking in motivation. It's a path to social and health problems, low school performance, unemployment, and delinquency" (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1648). In Reagan's story, poverty programs only create more poverty.

In accepting the presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention on August 23, 1984, Reagan explains how the situation of the poor was a function of previous administration policies supported by the Democrats. In doing so, Reagan identifies the "cycle of dependency":

By nearly every measure, the position of poor Americans worsened under the leadership of our opponents. Teenage drug abuse, out-of-wedlock births, and crime increased dramatically. Urban neighborhoods and schools deteriorated. Those whom government intended to help discovered a cycle of dependency that could not be broken. Government became a drug, providing temporary relief, but addiction as well. (Reagan, 1985b, p. 1176)

In this story, welfare is a drug, and the recipients of that drug became addicted causing a litany of problems.

In all of these speeches, Reagan provided solutions to this problem. First, Reagan stressed that assistance is “being retargeted to the truly needy” (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1115). Second, he emphasized a plan to “strengthen families” to “reduce poverty”, and this can be done by “reducing the economic burdens of inflation and taxes” (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1648). Third, Reagan indicated a need to end “reliance on the government process” and renew “our faith in the human process” (Reagan, 1985b, p. 1176). In other words, Reagan explains:

[T]here is only one compassionate, sensible, and effective policies for Federal assistance: We must focus domestic spending on the poor and bypass the bureaucracies by giving assistance directly to those who need it. We must end dependency, eliminate quotas, and foster a vital, innovative economy that rewards all Americans according to their talent and hard work. If we do, we can enhance our democratic ideals and make America a genuine opportunity society. (Reagan, 1985a, p. 342)

The problem of dependency and its solution accomplishes two things. First, it justifies Reagan’s economic policies, specifically his plan to further reduce spending on the poor. He is able to accomplish this by what Asen (2002) would call “gesturing to the New Deal” (p. 69) and decrying the policies, the policymakers, and the policy-administrators. Second, by referring to an economy based on “talent and hard work” he sets forth “moralistic, individualistic interpretations of a person’s socioeconomic status” (Asen, 2002, p.69).

## Helping the Poor

Denouncing the opposition had been central to Reagan's poverty discourse in justifying previous policies, and while criminalizing the poor and explaining the problem of dependency were new narrative strategies, elements of these strategies could be found in the justification of the plan for economic recovery. Specifically, the newer strategies depicted the welfare recipients as the culprits of economic troubles. However, in justifying subsequent economic policies, Reagan depicted the welfare recipients in a different way, as the beneficiaries of economic policies.

First, in a news conference on September 28, 1982, Reagan again develops a response to the fairness of his economic policies. He describes the fairness of the program in a different way. He explains that the cuts and the tax policies are fair because they help to curb inflation and "those people who are on Aid for Dependent Children find that they have increased purchasing power because of the change in the inflation rate, people at the poverty level have about \$600 more in purchasing power; median-income family in America has about \$1,500 more purchasing power" (Reagan, 1983b, p. 1228). Therefore, in Reagan's scenario, people receiving public assistance and even those not receiving public assistance, but still at the poverty level, are helped. He elaborates by stating "their welfare dollars will now buy several hundred dollars more than they would before" (Reagan, 1983b, p. 1341).

Second, Reagan explains how the program of economic recovery is beneficial to everyone, including the poor. Reagan notes, "A sparkling economy is the best hope for all who strive to pull themselves up. And we have a program to do that. It's called economic recovery" (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1114). This is clearly a part of what Asen (2002)

called the “Gospel of Wealth” (p.69). With a strong economy, anyone is able to “pull themselves up”. He continues, “you can only build a durable recovery with more freedom, not more government” (Reagan, 1984b, p. 1114). In this story, everyone able to benefit from a strong economy, and expansive government programs can only undermine this effort.

### Assessing Narrative Probability and Narrative Fidelity

Was Reagan’s economic story successful? At an instrumental level, the story was extremely successful. The *Washington Post* described Reagan’s 1984 reelection as an “awesome victory” and “a huge majority of the electorate was also voting for its preference for a set of ideas and sentiments that Mr. Reagan has espoused” (“The Reagan Triumph,” 1984). Moreover, the electorate wanted “what Mr. Reagan offered” (“The Reagan Triumph,” 1984, p. A14).

Central to Reagan’s overwhelming victory was the economy. The *New York Times* reported, “[I]t was the economy that set the basic pattern for President Reagan’s stunning re-election sweep” (Smith, 1984, p. A1). The election gained “a resounding vote of confidence for his handling of the economy and used it to power a coast-to-coast landslide” (Smith, 1984, p. A1). Polls indicated that the economy was more important than other issues Reagan espoused, “[T]he Times/CBS News poll showed that it was the electorate’s feelings about the economy more than Mr. Reagan’s appeals to traditional values or any specific vision for the future” (Smith, 1984, p. A1).

However, Reagan’s depiction of the poor did influence some individuals to support former Vice President Walter Mondale; as reported by the *Washington Post*, “Mondale supporters were influenced by the ‘fairness’ issue -- saying that they believed

Reagan favored the rich while Mondale would be sympathetic to the problems of the poor” (Broder, 1984, p.A1). Nonetheless, considering that Reagan won by a “landslide” (Broder, 1984, p.A1), Mondale’s plan to “tax the rich and their corporations and use the money to comfort the poor and near-poor” was no match for Reagan’s vision of the poor becoming “unpoor” as a result of “industry and hard work” (Cohen, 1984, p. A27). In other words, Reagan’s story of an “opportunity society” and discussion of the poor was far more successful than Mondale’s.

To understand why this story was successful, an assessment of narrative probability and narrative fidelity is necessary. Reagan’s depiction of the opposition is consistent with the prior stories told in justifying the plan for economic recovery and the federalism proposal. In justifying his economic policies, Reagan depicts the opposition as working to maintain the bureaucracy and not to working to alleviate poverty. Reagan claims that any “horror stories” are the result of the “political demagoguery” of the opposition. In addition, these individuals are also responsible or partly responsible for the poverty that many are experienced. The coherence of this story is enhanced by the previous stories.

However, other than using the California anecdote, Reagan does not provide any specific evidence of “special-interest groups” being specifically responsible for the opposing stories, nor is he able to specifically explain what constitutes “political demagoguery”. On the other hand, his reelection did hinge on the status of the economy; therefore, for the audience, it may have passed the “logic of good reasons”. More importantly, if previous depictions were accepted, this story would “correspond” to what the audience already knows.

Reagan's criminalizing of the poor is consistent with the depiction of the poor in the plan for economic recovery. In that story, the welfare recipients were the culprits for the slow economy; therefore, criminalizing them would confirm the accepted story of economic recovery, by depicting the poor as working against the individual worker. In this particular story, however, Reagan explicitly states the reason for the cuts to programs for the poor is because they are engaging in illegal activity. In previous stories, Reagan made this claim implicitly. Again, this story would pass the test of narrative fidelity because it extends on what the audience already knows, and Reagan's success in the 1984 election would provide even more support for this claim. It should also be noted that Reagan only criminalizes the poor and questions the moral character of the poor. He does not question the moral character of the business owners that allow individuals to purchase the "banned" items with food stamps.

Reagan's explanation of the problem of dependency would also meet the standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. First, this story is coherent with the dysfunctional welfare system depicted in the plan for economic recovery. Second, the "army of professionals" again suggests the bureaucratic growth created by the program. Third, and most importantly, it is consistent "with the story of America" (Fisher, 1987, p. 156). It decries the system of bureaucracy and promotes the system of individual growth. It promotes the traditional conception of a family and the belief that if an individual works hard, he or she can accomplish anything.

The story of the impoverished being helped by the economic policies is consistent with the story told in the plan for economic recovery. In the story of the plan for economic recovery, inflation was depicted as a primary cause for economic woes.

Therefore, if inflation was abated, everyone would benefit. The savior for the poor is not government programs, it is the economy.

### Summary and Conclusions

As explained by newspaper accounts of the 1984 Presidential election, even though some voters in the 1984 election were influenced to vote for Mondale because of a disdain for Reagan's policies toward the poor, Reagan's handling of the economy served as an impetus for many to reelect. Whether or not these economic policies were the result of increase economic growth or increased confidence in the economy is a matter for economists to decide. However, there are some important rhetorical implications to Reagan's story.

First, this discourse does provide evidence for Asen's (2002) claim that Reagan "created a discursive context favorable to" mid-90s welfare reform (p. 68). Reagan's depictions of welfare recipients were similar to the depictions that Gring-Pemble (2001) claimed were dominant in hearings that led to the passage of 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). By criminalizing the poor, questioning the moral character of the poor, and claiming the poor become dependent on welfare, Reagan provided the image of the "feckless" welfare recipient, an individual "poor values" (Gring-Pemble, 2001, p. 349). By depicting the dependent mother as a teenager, Reagan set the tone for "welfare mothers as predominately immature youth" (Gring-Pemble, 2001, p. 353). Moreover, by associating receipt of welfare with the breakdown of families, there is link between Reagan's rhetoric and the rhetorical constructions that served "as evidence to support legislative proposals and policies designed to enforce marriage, paternal economic support, and material

dependence” (Gring-Pemble, 2003, p. 476). While Reagan may not have been the first to depict welfare recipients in these ways, there is, at the very least, a connection between Reagan’s rhetoric and the rhetoric that dominated the PRWORA hearings.

Second, by telling a story in which the poor are the beneficiaries of economic growth and simultaneously claiming that welfare only creates more poverty while excluding of stories of welfare recipients rising from poverty, direct public assistance becomes a way to maintain poverty, and in Reagan’s story the only way to alleviate poverty is his economic policies. In his story, even the truly needy would be unable to escape poverty with public assistance. Public assistance becomes the creator of poverty.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

From the analysis of the narrative rationality of Reagan's poverty discourse, some significant conclusions can be made. First, in many instances Reagan was able to repudiate the regimes of the past. He also associated his opposition with previous regimes and blamed them for economic decline. Second, Reagan used repetitive anecdotes to justify his policies. Third, Reagan was able to construct narratives that met the standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity; however, in the case of the federalism proposal, he failed to meet those standards. Fourth, Reagan's rhetorical construction of welfare recipients and the welfare system may have informed depictions that were prevalent in the PRWORA debates. Reagan accomplished this through reconstructing poverty discourse through economic recovery, federalism and justification of economic policies.

Reagan was able to reconstruct poverty discourse through his plan for economic recovery. He constructed a narrative that placed the individual worker as the victim of the increased spending on social programs. The recipients of the benefits of these programs, specifically the individuals Reagan deemed the non-needy, became the victimizers in this narrative. The non-needy were responsible for the growth in government and economic decline. Reagan was able to defend his implication of the poor through the use of an anecdote from his experience as governor of California. In the end, through the use of repetitive depictions within the anecdote, the intended audience

(Congress) judged this story to be correct, and Reagan's plan for economic recovery passed. In other words, for the audience, the story met the standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

Reagan was able to reconstruct poverty discourse through his Federalism proposal. Reagan proposed a "swap" that would devolve control of AFDC and the food stamp program to the states in exchange for the Federal Government assuming responsibility of Medicaid; however, this proposal was eventually dropped from the Federalism Legislation. Even though this particular narrative failed to meet the standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, the narrative did reconstruct poverty discourse in two ways. First, this narrative characterized poverty as a local concern. Second, this narrative pitted grants-in-aid programs, specifically AFDC and food stamps, against national defense.

Reagan was able to reconstruct poverty discourse through his justification of his economic policies. He used four narratives to justify his plan to reduce government spending post-economic recovery. Again, the reduction in spending included programs target toward the poor. First, he denounced the opposition by claiming that they were engaging in "political demagoguery" or trying to inflame the public for political purpose. Moreover, this strategy claimed that the stories presented by the opposition that identified problems with reductions in spending were the result of the federal bureaucracy attempting to portray reductions in spending in a negative way. Second, Reagan criminalized the poor and questioned the morality of the individuals receiving public assistance. Third, Reagan explained the problems of welfare dependency, and claimed that an individual could best rise out of poverty through limited government and hard

work. Fourth, a new depiction of the poor also emerged in this narrative. Reagan depicted the poor and welfare recipients of welfare as the beneficiaries of his economic programs and policies. Despite some complaints about the fairness of Reagan's economic policies, the electorate judged his narrative to be coherent and consonant and reelected Reagan largely on his economic policies. As a result of narratives depicting the poor as beneficiaries of reductions in spending and welfare as the cause of poverty, stories that suggest the poor can use government programs to improve their socioeconomic status are excluded.

Furthermore, there are links between Reagan's rhetorical construction of welfare—recipients and the system itself—and the rhetorical construction leading to the passage of PRWORA. Elements of the three depictions described by Gring-Pemble (2001) that dominated the PRWORA debates can be found in Reagan's story and poverty discourse. PRWORA attempted to “enforce marriage” (Gring-Pemble, 2003), and Reagan associated welfare receipt with family dysfunction. Reagan's discourse placed poverty as a local concern by attempting to devolve AFDC, and 1996 welfare reform replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families which gave states control of welfare (Gring-Pemble, 2001, p. 347). Although this study did not track the development of Reagan's rhetorical construction to identify a seamless link, it does provide significant evidence for Asen's (2002) claim that Reagan provided the “discursive context” for the PRWORA debates (p. 68).

Because of the language used by Lyndon Johnson in his War on Poverty, the reconstruction of poverty discourse was inevitable. Zarefsky (1977) explains:

[T]he President's call for "unconditional victory" raised expectations against which later performance would be judged. If those who were caught up in a revolution of rising expectations found their expectations unmatched by the program's performance, it was likely that they would blame the program. After all, the Administration had called for total victory and had claimed that the nation had the knowledge to banish poverty. (p. 356)

The expectations created by the Johnson Administration's rhetoric made the story told by Reagan consonant. Government assistance to alleviate poverty was supposed to work. When it failed to meet the high expectations, Reagan's denouncement of the programs seemed to be on point.

However, Reagan did more than simply blame the programs of the War on Poverty. The programs failed, but they were also responsible for the failure of the economy. Reagan was able to expand on this criticism because he had the power to repudiate and reshape political order, and this can explain why his depictions of the welfare system and welfare recipients still prevalent in the PRWORA debate.

#### Directions for Future Research

First, Skowronek's (1997) "Recurrent Structures of Presidential Authority" (p. 36) emerges as an effective way of understanding Presidential rhetoric. What a president says is largely a function of the authority that he has. Reagan had the authority to reshape government. His rhetoric reflected that authority. Future studies examining Presidential rhetoric should consider the power a president has to reshape government and repudiate previous regimes.

Second, in reference to narrative probability and narrative fidelity, Hart (1997) explains, “Ultimately, of course, there can be no final determination on such matters, for accuracy and goodness often exist in the eye of the beholder” (p. 97). Determination of narrative probability and narrative fidelity is largely audience dependent. Perhaps then the task of the critic is to account for the audience’s acceptance of fantastic or improbable narratives, or at least, to note that the stories are at odds with reality. This study focused on how Reagan’s discourse shaped reality to justify his policies; however, future studies could do more to determine whether Reagan’s depiction of the poor was representative of reality. Future studies could focus on the accuracy of Reagan’s poverty discourse.

Third, although this study made reference to challenges to Reagan’s narrative, it did not describe these challenges at length. Who was challenging Reagan’s poverty discourse? Were they special-interest groups? Were the challengers and opposition government officials? What rhetorical strategies did they use? It would be worthwhile to understand how a president of reconstruction is challenged.

#### Stories that Affirm

This study reveals that the depictions of welfare recipients and the welfare system during the PRWORA debate can be traced to the depictions created by Ronald Reagan. This may be a result of Lewis’ (1987) claim that in the arena of public policy, Reagan’s narrative rationality has prevailed (p. 288). Moreover, Fisher (1987) claims that Reagan’s narrative will remain dominant until effective story can refute it (p. 156).

Therefore, if a rhetor seeks to change the depictions and policies of the status quo, then the rhetor must construct an effective story that refutes the current depictions and policies. However, Asen (2002) explains, “Affirming images must be crafted and

circulated to create reasons for addressing the concerns of the poor” (p. 239). Moreover, “affirmative images are necessary to motivate policymakers to enact potentially efficacious reforms” (Asen, 2002, p. 239). Consequently, to change the status quo, the story must include depictions that both debunk current images of the poor and affirm positive images. However, in order to change poverty discourse, this story of the poor would need to be told by a rhetor with the authority to repudiate current structures of power.

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