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A publication of The Rockford Institute.
Editorial and Advertising Offices: 934 North Main Street, Rockford, IL 61103.
Editorial Phone: (815) 964-5054.
Advertising Phone: (815) 964-5811.
Subscription Department: P.O. Box 800, Mount Morris, IL 61054. Call 1-800-877-5459.
For information on advertising in *Chronicles*, please call Rochelle Frank at (815) 964-5811.

U.S.A. Newsstand Distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870.

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Chronicles (ISSN 0887-5731) is published monthly for \$24 per year by The Rockford Institute, 934 North Main Street, Rockford, IL 61103-7061. Second-class postage paid at Rockford, IL and additional mailing offices.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Chronicles*, P.O. Box 800, Mount Morris, IL 61054.

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Chronicles
A JOURNAL OF AMERICAN CULTURE

Vol. 16, No. 5 May 1992

POLEMICS & EXCHANGES

On 'Homelessness'

Theodore Pappas (Cultural Revolutions, November 1991) says, "There is, of course, no long-term answer to homelessness," but this begs the question. The focus should not be on solving the specific problem of homelessness, but on seeing homelessness as a symptom of modern decay. When the change of focus takes place, a "long-term answer to homelessness" will begin taking form.

Two observations by John Lukacs will help change this focus. Lukacs has pointed out that the modern age "passed" shortly after the end of World War II, and that our current concept of "home" was, directly and indirectly, one of the most important features of that age. So, Mr. Pappas, instead of looking at homelessness as an affair of bums, winos, derelicts, drunkards, addicts, slackers, and the insane, take a look from a point of view that sees all these as marks of a dying or already dead age.

Your piece itself gave several clues to a "long-term answer." You referred to Dan McMurry, who has called the loosening of the cohesiveness of the American family "the most important element in the explosive growth of homelessness." Well, one long-term answer to homelessness would then be to tighten up the family screws. McMurry himself falls down on the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill. He apparently failed to read *Myth of Mental Illness* by Thomas S. Szasz, who believes "mental illness" is no true "illness" but rather the result of failure to learn the rules of mental health. Another long-term answer to homelessness would therefore be to discover these rules and to teach them effectively. McMurry also speaks of the "steep increase in the number of alcoholics, especially among the young." So, here again, a long-term answer may be to regard alcoholism as a form of mental illness.

Are these "long-term answers" too difficult, Mr. Pappas? If and when we find and put these answers into effect, their purpose will not only be to put the homeless problem under control, but to solve the broader educational, economic, political, scientific, and social ones.

—Stephen Miles
Tucson, AZ

Mr. Pappas Replies:

I repeat, there is no long-term "answer" to homelessness. I admit in my editorial that several causes have contributed to homelessness, such as the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill in the 1960's and 70's, and it goes without saying that some homelessness would be eliminated if traditional family ties were strengthened and once again encouraged. And if we could solve "the broader educational, economic, political, scientific [?], and social" problems plaguing our culture, surely some more homelessness would diminish, as would drug abuse, street crime, illegitimacy, and a hundred other pathologies.

But even if we could return to the blissful days of the 1950's, when women were homemakers and fathers were breadwinners and the marital contract was something sacred, "homelessness" would still exist. The homeless simply would not be adorned with the sainted status they now enjoy; they would be called what they have always been called—bums, drunkards, misfits, and derelicts—and those in need of medical attention or psychological counseling would be either hospitalized or institutionalized. We can't go back to the 1950's, but we can reclaim the right to clean up our streets and parks.

That millions of ordinary people—"just like you and me"—are without homes and sleeping on our streets is pure myth, a lie propagated by special interest groups pursuing their own agenda. There are far fewer homeless than advocates claim, and the medical and psychological problems of many of the homeless are far more severe than commonly admitted. Criminal activity among the homeless is also coming to the fore. Late last year a 30-year-old man was arrested in Galveston, Texas, for the slaying of a female companion. The man was believed to be part of a train-riding gang of homeless men and women that is thought to be responsible for several murders throughout the West. Most interesting is the way the Associated Press described these individuals as "transients," "hobos," and "vagrants"—anything but "homeless." We wouldn't want, of course, to give the public the wrong opinion.

GOVERNOR CLINTON'S candidacy for President, plagued as it's been by charges of marital infidelity and draft evasion, has brought to the fore once again the question of whether personal character is relevant to fitness for public office. There are those to whom it is obvious that private behavior is relevant to public office. Others contend that public officials should be measured by their public acts and their private lives left alone. The latter position may have had some validity in older and better days of the Republic, when private life and public affairs were distinct spheres of life. The fact that the bachelor Grover Cleveland had possibly, as a young man, fathered an illegitimate child did not affect his capacity to execute the duties of Chief Magistrate of the Union, because he did not aspire to be anything more than a chief magistrate. That is, he sought nothing more than to execute the laws in keeping with his office, just as he had done as sheriff of Buffalo, where his duties had included that of hangman, and as governor of New York.

But the case is very different now, because the separation of state and society has completely broken down. When the state has its hand in our pocket, tells us with whom we may associate, threatens to regulate our spiritual life, and generally superintends us from cradle to grave, the private virtues of public officials, or lack thereof, become significant to us. This is especially true of those who put themselves forward upon a politics of moralism. Martin Luther King's lying and lechery might not invalidate his public position, but when his public position rests upon his role as a religious and moral leader whose chief business is to break down the barrier between private morality and public policy, then it does indeed become highly relevant. No one is entitled to be a saint until they have been examined by the devil's advocate.

Imagine the misery the Republic would have been spared if the private defects of character of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had been widely known. Certainly neither would have been elected had the public been aware of what is readily known now. We have had, since Kennedy, a politics in which public figures have tried to carry the day by the glamour of high moral purpose—in which

case private character becomes extremely relevant. Since the Kennedys have prospered largely through celebration of their glamour and virtues, we are entitled to know the other side of the story. Think what would have been saved to the Treasury if the people had known in advance about Senator Cranston's methods of campaign finance. But, of course, our great crusading media hid all these things from us, not considering them relevant. Imagine the barrage of sensationalism we would have received if poor Nixon, or Goldwater, or George Wallace

had been guilty of 1 percent of the *private* malfeasance of Kennedy or Johnson. We can always count on the media to pursue their own agenda. Which is why we have seen a sudden rehabilitation of Dan Quayle, as the media have realized his usefulness in putting down a really dangerous conservative like Pat Buchanan.

In the meantime, we must insist that we have complete information about those who put themselves forward for public trusts. We want to know if our surgeon drinks or is a homosexual, if

