

# CHARLES MURRAY



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## SAVING UNDE

Ken  
Auletta  
interviews  
Charles  
Murray

*No book in recent years has prompted as much debate over the legacy of the Great Society poverty programs as Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*. It has become the intellectual fuel for the conservative drive to dismantle the programs and the central target for the liberal counteroffensive. Murray argues that the social programs of the past 20 years have slowed, and even reversed, earlier progress in reducing poverty, crime, ignorance, and discrimination. While we agree with some of the criticism of Murray's book (see Phillip Keisling's review, December 1984), we also feel that his case is more compelling than most liberals want to concede and that his facts and arguments have been at least partly misrepresented by many of his opponents. Murray raises important questions regarding the implicit messages of the poverty programs to those they were intended to benefit. He challenges liberals to look with clear eyes at whether the programs are really working or whether they just make people feel virtuous for providing them.*

*To challenge Murray on these issues—and to give him an opportunity to respond to his critics—we turned to Ken Auletta, who writes for both *The New Yorker* and the *New York Daily News*. A former New York City official, Auletta is known for his firsthand reporting on society's efforts to help those at the bottom. In his 1982 book, *The Underclass*, he concluded that "neither the right's desire to blame individuals nor the left's desire to blame the system" brings us any closer to understanding our responsibility to aid those in need.*

—The Editors

# THE CLASS:



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**Ken Auletta:** What is the most outrageous thing that has been said about your book?

**Charles Murray:** That it was written in the service of a “radical political agenda,” that I selected the evidence knowingly in order to make my points.

**Auletta:** Are you thinking of the [Robert] Greenstein piece in *The New Republic*? [March 25, 1985]

**Murray:** Yes, that’s the one that hit the hardest because it was a big article in a prestigious magazine. Actually, I guess the most outrageous piece was Tony Brown’s column, in which he said that I advocated concentration camps for blacks. I can’t get so excited about a piece like that because it is so completely bizarre.

**Auletta:** Was there a common mistake in their views?

**Murray:** Well, the critics run the whole gamut from those who say that the book is both fraudulent and incompetent to those who say, “The guy makes a lot of good points, but he’s wrong about such and such.” On that spectrum, the common mistake has been to cast the argument of *Losing Ground* in terms of stereotypes that are often used by people who make similar points. So the story of Phyllis and Harold [a hypothetical couple used to illustrate the way welfare affects poor families] comes across to many critics as being a statement that young women figure up the amount of money they can make in welfare benefits and modulate their fertility behavior according to the rise and fall of that amount of money. And in unemployment the stereotype is “the lazy bums who are living a comfortable life on welfare rather than going out to work.”

These are stereotypes the right has used a lot, but I don't fault some critics for taking off from that . . .

**Auletta:** I want to come back later to your views on some of those things, but let me take them in some order. Obviously some liberals took a lot of offense at the book, and I wonder whether, from their own ideological perspective, they are not correct to take offense. For instance, you bridle that your complex message has gotten lost in some of the criticisms of the book. Yet even though you take pains to say, and I quote, "no single demon is to blame" for the persistence of poverty. Not AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children], not food stamps, not law enforcement, not rent control. Isn't it true, however, that you view liberal nostrums as the chief culprit?

**Murray:** Well, the way you put it is correct, if by "nostrums" you include not only legislative programs but also court decisions, and especially an intellectual mindset that governs policy in more informal ways.

**Auletta:** And therefore, a good card-carrying liberal understandably takes offense with your thesis.

**Murray:** Yes. If you had said to me a liberal must bridle with what you said, then I would argue with you. But when you say "card-carrying," then you're right. There is a big difference between those people who supported these programs in the sixties and into the seventies but have been looking all the time at what is happening and getting disturbed and those who supported them in the sixties and seventies and in my view simply shut their eyes to what was going on around them.

**Auletta:** Let's stay with that a bit. First, list the programs in your view that have worked well.

**Murray:** The increases in Social Security benefits, I think, can be credited with a large part of the reduction of poverty among the elderly. A variety of educational programs either have worked or can work. In most cases, I think the statement is they can work. A good Headstart program can be a terrific thing for a three- or four-year-old child from a disadvantaged family. That is not to say that a whole bunch of Headstart programs worked beautifully, because I'm not sure they did. But there certainly is no reason why they couldn't work well. And I would generalize on that statement to a variety. . . .

**Auletta:** Don't generalize yet, I want to go on with that in a minute. I want you to offer a laundry list of programs that worked. You've mentioned education and Social Security. . . .

**Murray:** On superficial examination, Medicaid

should have improved the health of poor people. If you accept the view that there was terrible access to medical care prior to Medicaid, there is certainly much better access after Medicaid, even if it's inefficient. Therefore, Medicaid *should* also have improved health. But I am still an agnostic inclining toward pessimism on that score, so I guess I can't include Medicaid in the list. A case can be made, I think, that in certain southern states the Voting Rights Act of 1965 hastened a process that was already underway. A case can be made that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 hastened a process that was already underway.

**Auletta:** Would you make that case?

**Murray:** I'm not speaking from data now; this is from my general reading on the issue and my own view of the situation. But I would make the case that they hastened those outcomes. I would also make the case that they produced, particularly regarding the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many other, unintended spinoffs. And I'm not sure the balance is a plus. Let it be heard loud and clear, I am saying civil rights and equal access to public accommodations are things that black Americans should have. I'm delighted to see that they have them. I think the government's role in enforcement of such things probably needs recasting.

**Auletta:** You've cited a few successes. What are the principles you extract from these successes?

**Murray:** The government knows how to educate kids who are ready to study. We know how to take a youngster who wants to be an electrician and teach him how to be an electrician if he is prepared to come to that training center and work his ass off, and pay attention, and go out there and stomp the streets looking for an electrician's job when he gets out. For that matter I think we know how to provide better prenatal care to young single women who are pregnant, if those young single women bring to that instruction a commitment to learn more about how they can take care of their babies. We can do all sorts of things with people who have passed a critical threshold of investment—an investment of time, of commitment, of, in some cases, small amounts of money. What we do not seem to be able to do is cajole people into wanting to make those initial investments.

I am speaking as one who spent a lot of years evaluating demonstration efforts where you try one approach, then you try another approach, then you try a third approach, and you still can't get people to make that initial investment.

**Auletta:** Let's take one experiment, Supported Work. It was targeted at a large group of ex-addicts, long-term welfare recipients, ex-

offenders, and delinquent youth. With the long-term dependent women on welfare, they found a nearly 40 percent success rate. That is to say, roughly 40 percent of the women on welfare, who enrolled in this job program, came out, got a job, and got off of welfare. Is that a success, four out of ten?

**Murray:** Supported Work is something that I'm going to talk about at length, both because you wrote a book about it [*The Underclass*] and also because I spent quite a bit of time examining the technical evaluation of it.

Let's start with the welfare mothers, an excellent example. I think it was the two-year follow-up that showed that 42 percent of the AFDC participants were still employed. In the control group, those who had gotten none of this assistance whatsoever, 35 percent were employed. Now if you ignore all sorts of reasons why that gap might be inflated, you can say that the investment in Supported Work gave you an increment of seven percentage points of women who were employed—35 percent versus 42 percent.

To me, those results are not evidence of success; they are evidence of the enormous problems we face. Supported Work was in many ways the apotheosis of trying to cajole people to escape dependence. It provided them with training in certain kinds of job readiness skills, it provided them with counseling, it provided them with more or less guaranteed jobs for nine or 12 months. It provided them with a level of support that we cannot conceivably supply to huge numbers of people. I think it is probably too expensive to do that.

They tackled four different types of people, all of them hard-core. With one of those four groups, the two-year follow-up showed a success rate of 42 percent employed versus 35 percent. With one other, the ex-addicts, it was pretty much a wash. With the other two [school dropouts and ex-offenders] the program clearly failed. You add those up and tell me: Shall we think about the statistics in the two groups where you had the employment gap in the wrong direction? Or shall we simply discount those and say, "Well, with those, there's something wrong with the numbers. When 42 percent versus 35 percent goes in the right direction, it's evidence of big success, but 42 percent versus 35 percent in the wrong direction is not something you need to worry about"?

**Auletta:** No. You can come to another conclusion, following the notion of targeting. This program failed with ex-offenders and delinquent youth. You could then ask one of two sets of

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questions. You could ask why it failed. Or maybe you could say that we will put limited resources into the target group—in this case welfare mothers—that showed the most prospect for success. But you're still back with the fundamental question: What is success? If you get real close to a program, you're going to see individuals whose lives were touched and changed by these programs, and you'll therefore be more likely to conclude that there are some beneficial effects. But if you generalize from an arm chair, you might come to a different conclusion.

**Murray:** You observed that program. You observed real people who were clearly reacting to something good that had happened to them because of that program—and that's true. I've seen the same thing in programs for delinquents, in programs for kids in inner-city schools. But if you had spent all of your time dealing with people who *weren't* in the program you would have seen a variety of things that touched the lives of young single women and led them to get and hold a job they had not had before, which led them to do positive things. And these wouldn't have had anything to do with the program, they would have had to do with things that just happened in life. The question is, how do you get more of those things to happen? I say, get rid of all the programs and you will have lots more than you have now. Because what touches people's lives can be as simple as a parent saying to a kid as he is growing up, "You have to get out there and get a job no matter what." Getting ten million parents to say that is a hell of a lot more effective way of increasing "job-readiness" than a Supported Work program. I look at the those very minor results of Supported



**'I have become radicalized since the book came out. I feel much more strongly than I did a year ago that we will have to [end welfare support for healthy, working-age people] or live with an underclass of the size it is now.'**

Work and say, this is not good enough. This is not a route out of the morass.

**Auletta:** But is that an argument for not pursuing a change in the design of the program, or is that an argument, in fact, to change it in some ways that might make it more successful?

**Murray:** It is clearly an argument in favor of tinkering with the design of the program, but I'd say that your definition of tinkering and mine are probably quite different.

**Auletta:** What's yours?

**Murray:** Well, I'll tell you how I would have dealt with, say, the unemployed youth. Here are kids who are saying to the government, and anybody else who will listen, "Dammit, we want a job." And so you provide them with those jobs. You make the jobs open, however, not just to kids who can bring evidence that they have been a drug addict or evidence that they have been a delinquent. You open it up to everybody in, say, that geographic area. Let's say it's a training program as well as an employment program—we're going to train the kids to be auto mechanics. Anybody can sign up and get in. So you've got an incoming class of 100 kids. They come in the first week, and it's tough. And there are certain prerequisites—math and reading, nothing excessive, nothing more than they will need to become a good auto mechanic. But more important, there will be a simple requirement that you have to attend and you have to work hard. If you don't work hard, you're not going to be able to master the material. The promise is, if you do all of this, you're going to walk out of here three months from now an auto mechanic, and garages all over the Washington and Virginia area are going to want to hire you.

Then you start kicking kids out. You kick them

out when they don't show up on time. You kick them out when they want to get into a fight with the instructor. In the first cycle, you may get rid of 90 percent. The ten percent who get [through]—a highly self-selected group—are going to be good auto mechanics, and they are going to get good jobs. I argue that the next cycle you are going to have some different kinds of kids coming into the program, kids who are not going to call the instructor a motherfucker when the instructor tells them to do something because they've heard that if you do that you will get kicked out. So over a period of time, you're going to have honest-to-God training, not ersatz training, which is what we've had in the Job Corps so many times.

**Auletta:** There were some Supported Work programs that followed this rigorous example, and obviously there were other training programs that did as well. From my own exposure to people on a community level, many, not all, perhaps not most, believe that you set certain standards, and if people don't comply, if they come late, or they don't show up, or if they're disrespectful, they get thrown out. Period. But what I'm asking is, do you see a solution for that group, the "underclass," who have certain habitual or behavioral problems, who are not "socialized," yet who nevertheless are the people who most frighten the citizenry and have the highest propensity for criminal acts, dependency on welfare, and anti-social behavior?

**Murray:** Remember, I said to you the first time that maybe 90 percent flunk out. It's a part of my argument that, as time goes on, you'll get a smaller and smaller percentage because they will have a better understanding of what's required. Let's think about it in terms of specific youngsters that ran into that in Supported Work. Now sometimes their ways of seeing the world are so screwed up, you don't know what you can do with them. With that hard core, I am as pessimistic about what can be done through my approach as I am pessimistic about anyone else's.

But you also know from your own experience that very frequently the kids who are the most criminal, and the hardest to get close to, also are the brightest, most able kids. And they also are those who in their own, unfortunately twisted way, are very responsive to challenge. Now the way they respond is often destructive. The challenge is perceived as something "in their face." But those kids often can be reached even more easily than a lot of softer-core kids if you do provide the challenge. It's what teachers have said about kids from time immemorial. You take

# HOW WELFARE CAN WORK

by Michael Bernick

An important battle is taking place in California over reform of the state's welfare system

A proposal before the state legislature called the Employment Preparation Program (EPP) would require welfare recipients to try to find jobs, and if unsuccessful, to enroll in serious job training. EPP avoids both the misplaced paternalism of the past two decades and the punitive tendencies of the right. The measure is bitterly opposed, however, by a coalition of liberal democrats, the American Civil Liberties Union, and welfare rights groups.

In many cases, the current welfare system fulfills its original purpose of helping women who are single parents get through hard times. But just as often, Aid to Families with Dependent Children is a terrible failure—a way of life rather than a form of short-term assistance. Half of the women who are receiving AFDC will be on the welfare rolls for eight years or more. These women account for the bulk of AFDC expenditures. Worse, this dependency tends to perpetuate itself. Children raised in welfare homes show considerably higher unemployment than comparable low-income youth.

Liberals have tended to dismiss welfare dependency as a conservative bugaboo. But the numbers are becoming unavoidable. In California, the AFDC rolls grew by more than 66 percent between 1970 and 1985, while the state population grew by only 27 percent. The increase in welfare rolls has continued even during the recent upswing in the state economy.

Early this year, State Senator John Garamendi, a Democrat from rural Stockton, introduced EPP to try to halt the rise in dependency. EPP focuses on adult welfare recipients who are not caring for children under age six. It would require these people to participate in three-day workshops on how to find employment, followed by a four-week supervised job search. Those unable to find jobs would either begin job training or work in public or private nonprofit agencies. Individuals who refused to participate would receive reduced welfare payments, or none at all, for three months.

Welfare rights groups and the American Civil Liberties Union have offered familiar arguments in opposition to EEP. The Catholic bishop of Sacramento, for example, testified at a hearing on the proposal that it constituted involuntary servitude, and that welfare recipients should participate in training or work experience only voluntarily. As the Coalition of California Rights Organization put it, "We support a bill which uses 'sugar' to obtain participation in lieu of the 'stick'."

Are welfare reform efforts such as EEP really the work of right-wing sadists who have it in for both government and the poor? A number of recent projects suggest the contrary—that work requirements can break the pattern of dependency and help welfare recipients develop both their skills and their self-respect.

In 1982, for example, the county of San Diego tested the value of job-search and work requirements by randomly assigning nearly 7,000 AFDC recipients to one of three groups. One group received help in finding jobs; a second group got similar help, but if they did not find jobs, they were given mandatory work assignments. A third group was a control

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group, and received no special services.

Attendance at the job-search workshops was high, and nearly 25 percent of the participants found jobs. For those in the second group who didn't find employment, most of the assignments were entry-level clerical or maintenance positions with local government and nonprofit agencies: operating copying machines, preparing files, and helping to paint a public school, for example. The great majority of supervisors described the work as necessary, and said the participants demonstrated skills comparable to those of other employees.

Most of the participants regarded the work as a fair requirement for welfare benefits, and 60 percent said that their experiences would help them get a better job. When asked, "How do you feel most days about coming to work here?" nearly 70 percent answered they looked forward to the work day.

The long-term impact of the San Diego program in reducing welfare dependency remains to be measured. Thus far, however, the program has succeeded in helping women who entered as single parents and had long histories of dependency. These welfare recipients had both higher employment rates and earnings than those in the control group who received no special help.

Encouraging preliminary results also come from a demonstration project conducted during the past few years by Baltimore County. As in San Diego, an overwhelming majority of participants and supervisors there regard the work requirement as fair and the work as productive. Baltimore County has offered incentive payments to participants who show motivation and a positive attitude, and more than 70 percent of the participants have qualified for the bonuses.

One limitation of both the San Diego and Baltimore projects is that they rarely provided more than rudimentary job skills. In an ideal program, participants would be able to choose among areas such as word processing, office machine repair, or basic literacy classes as an alternative to immediate work experience—with the same strict attendance requirements that apply at job sites.

Despite their shortcomings, the San Diego and Baltimore demonstrations ought to encourage similar mandatory programs elsewhere. But in California, where welfare rights organizations recently denounced the San

Diego model as "slavery," liberal legislators have sought to replace the Garamendi legislation with a voluntary program. The trouble with such a program is that the majority of welfare recipients—especially long-term ones—will not take advantage of it. In Baltimore County, for example, excellent job training programs were available for years before the recent demonstration project. More than 80 percent of the welfare participants in the demonstration had never used these services.

At San Francisco Renaissance, where I work, we run job training programs and five separate businesses that train and employ welfare recipients. We are constantly struck by the talent we discover. One former welfare recipient, for example, set up the shipping and receiving department of our cable assembly business. Equally striking, however, is the lack of structure and support in many welfare households. Trainees suddenly drop out, or appear irregularly or late. For some, it is just too easy to fall back on public assistance.

Talk to adults who work with chronically unemployed youths—police, teachers, job training directors—and the same story unfolds: unemployment breeds in households where no parent works steadily—where no parent has *ever* worked steadily—and where there is little structure or sense of time. The benefits of a mandatory program go beyond the work experience. The simple process of getting up and going to work brings new discipline and structure to the welfare household. Even welfare recipients acknowledge that mandatory work and training can provide a helpful boost. A recent poll by the *Los Angeles Times* found that 59 percent of welfare recipients "have a favorable impression of workfare."

Mandatory programs alone will not end welfare dependency. But they are a starting point. Placing new expectations on welfare recipients helps these people, their families, and the communities in which they live. Work requirements are coming; 35 states have taken steps in this direction over the past four years. Welfare rights organizations and their supporters on the left should face this reality and work to design programs like EPP which can genuinely help people get back on their feet. The efforts of these groups so far have only perpetuated dependency, which is hardly doing poor people a favor.

a youngster who in many ways is a tough case. You challenge him. You don't give an inch in terms of certain standards. And he responds.

**Auletta:** A lot of the kids you're talking about are 19, or let's say they're 22. They've grown up without a family in many cases—most, I daresay—and they are twisted. They are embittered. They feel crippled. They don't know how to deal with life. I'm talking about saying "please" or "thank you." In many cases they don't know how to use an alarm clock. They've never cashed a check in a bank. Often they are afraid of the white world. If they're simply confronted with discipline and authority without some sense of—to use a dirty liberal word—compassion, or a sense of a helping hand, you may lose them even though they are good prospects. Now what do you say about that group?

**Murray:** Is "compassion" really the word we want to use?

**Auletta:** I don't blush from using that word.

**Murray:** Because I was going to suggest as a substitute, "love." One thing you must communicate to that portion of the kids, if you're ever going to reach them, is not only demands and not only discipline but also love. I don't want to quibble with you about words, but I think that concept is important.

**Auletta:** Caring?

**Murray:** Caring, yes; compassion, no. You don't want, in any way, shape, or form, to say, "You poor thing, it's not really your fault." You say to them, "You have it in you to make it, and I'm going to make you make it! And I'm going to make you make it, because I want you to succeed so badly."

**Auletta:** And I'm going to help you. . . .

**Murray:** [Pause—laughs.] Yes, except I bet that if you talk to ten teachers or ten people who have intervened in the lives of these kids and listened to the language they use, both the explicit and the tacit, I'm willing to bet that "help" is one word they avoid.

One thing that I have observed about the most effective people who deal with these kids is that they understand the seductions of paternalism, of patting them on the head and saying, "I'm going to help you."

**Auletta:** But help doesn't necessarily mean paternalism.

**Murray:** Yeah, but that's what it usually turns out to be.

**Auletta:** "I'm going to kick your ass!" is helping also.

**Murray:** True. We agree we want programs. But how do we do it? That's the point at which I

would part company with a lot of people. To me, the way you get those kinds of effective programs is not through a CETA program; it's not through a multi-billion dollar program of any sort; it's not even through the United Way, which I regard as just another form of corporatized charity. You do it by getting people like me [laughs] and other ordinary citizens a lot more involved, contributing money, contributing their time. But I'm getting sidetracked. Any time we talk about this really hard-core group, I think we have to confront one of the most unpalatable truths, which is that, by the time these kids are 19 or 22, there are very few we can get to.

I have been extremely discouraged in some ways by an experience of my own. There's a tutoring program here in Washington that selects kids based on test scores and so forth, and it goes into inner-city schools and gives them tutoring. They are the most eager, inquisitive kids you've ever dealt with. They respond to challenge beautifully. They respond to incentives beautifully. What's discouraging is that these kids—who are 14 or 15 instead of 19 or 22 and have done well in school—have a very truncated future ahead of them. In some cases it's because they only speak black English; they can only get so far if they

PAUL R. DIMOND

## Beyond Busing *Inside the Challenge to Urban Segregation*

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can't deal with the white world. In some cases it's because of the same fears of the white world you talked about. In other cases it's because they go back into the school system and are taunted for being high achievers or acting "white" and so have to conform to the peer pressure in high school. I see even *these* kids in the inner cities, at the ages of 14, 15, and 16, and I say that we've lost a lot of them already. They're gone. And it's that kind of experience that keeps driving me back to say we aren't going to solve these problems by attacking anywhere except at the prevention level. The only way you make major inroads is by some fundamental changes in the ways in which families are formed and children are raised.

Let's back up for a second and look at the development of black attitudes in the sixties. In an era when black assertiveness and confidence were soaring, and a black leader was getting the Nobel Peace prize, and black leaders occupied the high moral ground about any question, it would have been very easy to predict that in the next five or ten years we were going to see a black population, including the black poor, that would be adamant about taking what was theirs and fighting their way up and would be damned if they'd accept any favors from anybody. That's not what happened. In fact, in the sixties an attitude grew that certain ways of acting were demeaning. The phrase "Tom" took on whole new ramifications during the sixties.

The argument basically goes like this, as it has been expressed very straightforwardly by some young blacks: It's okay for Vietnamese to come here and push brooms and clean toilets and so forth. They've just gotten here. We've been waiting 300 years. We were held in slavery for all but the last 100 years of that. We've cleaned toilets already, and we are entitled to something more.

I think the generational split [in the black community] has been dramatic. As I have talked with the older generation of blacks, I have heard, in much more acerbic terms than one hears from conservative whites, a description of lazy, shiftless youngsters who don't know the meaning of work and who don't know what their parents have gone through in order to get them this far. It would be very heartening to find that this older generation was beginning to have its way. I do not know that to be true.

**Auletta:** Did you make a mistake in the last section of *Losing Ground*, where you speculated on whether or not we would not be better off just getting rid of all welfare. Was this the mistake that gave ammunition to critics to dismiss your argument?

**Murray:** I haven't made up my mind about that. I think on balance it was not. But I do fret. In fact I've reread the last chapter a few times and asked myself what would I change. I'm not sure. Remember, you're talking to a man who spent his career trying to make social programs work. That was my job as an evaluator, and in the last chapters of a book like this I'm supposed to tell people what the solutions are. The more I wrote, the more I backed myself into a corner. I would come up with something like a better Supported Work demonstration program, and the evaluator part of me said, "You don't really believe that it would work because you know all the ways it wouldn't work," so I would throw out that draft.

I finally got to the point where I had two positive things to say. One was that there's no reason why we can't have a terrific education system for poor people. We know how to do that. And so recommendations for that are in the last chapter. But I'm willing to go to the mat on affirmative action and other preferential treatment programs for blacks. I think they're pernicious and ought to be done away with. I said that in the last chapter, too.

Then I got to the welfare system, and I could not come up with any ideas for improvements that persuaded me. I finally realized that there *was* an answer I believed in. You want to cut illegitimate births among poor people? I know how to do that. You want to cut unemployment among young blacks? I know how to do that. You just rip away every kind of government support there is. What happens then? You're going to have lots of parents talking differently to daughters, and you're going to have lots of daughters talking differently to their boyfriends, and you're going to have lots of girls getting abortions and lots of babies being put up for adoption. You're not going to have nearly as many young single women keeping babies. And you're going to have lots of black kids who are suddenly going to find that it is not so demeaning after all to get a job sweeping floors, and they're going to keep those jobs.

What you saw in those last few pages of the book was my telling you the only solution that I couldn't talk myself out of based on all the previous data in the book. But there is ambivalence in that last chapter, too, which I guess came from my saying to myself, "You know, people are going to think you're a kook."

**Auletta:** Was that the only ambivalence?

**Murray:** No, there was also an ambivalence about whether I was right. Suppose we really did....

**Auletta:** Gut the programs. Wiped them out....

**Murray:** In this regard I think I have become radicalized since the book came out. When I wrote it, I saw a lot of good results if there were no welfare supports for healthy working-age people. But I was also extremely scared of trying to run the world that way. I'm still very scared of the transition, the amount of misery, and so forth. But I feel much more strongly than I did a year ago that either we will have to go that route or else we will have to say that we will live with an underclass of the size it is now.

**Auletta:** What has radicalized you since the book came out? When [Norman] Podhoretz wrote *Making It*, he was so stunned by the reaction of his critics that it helped drive him further right. Is that what drives you here?

**Murray:** I don't think so, because in my case the seductions have all been the other way. There have been all sorts of people who have been ready to welcome me to the ranks of the neoliberals if only I would be... a little more sensible: "Charles be serious. You can't do away with all of these programs. The job is to design them better, to become a good incrementalist." Or, "Murray has made a real contribution in forcing us to face some hard questions if only he would understand that government is part of the solution, not part of the problem," and all that. So my seductions were not to make a new place for myself in the wilderness.

**Auletta:** What about the seductions from the people in the [Reagan] administration and from the right.

**Murray:** I think that the Reagan people consider me to be just about as much of a loose cannon as liberals do.

**Auletta:** You seem to be saying that the Reagan administration is in this middle consensus group, so therefore some of the things you've said threaten their kind of safe harbor.

**Murray:** When you play that back to me, it does seem odd to me to say that the Reagan administration is centrist, but it is. The cuts that the Reagan administration proposed recently in social programs are not draconian. There is no detectable enthusiasm that I can see for striking out on new paths.

**Auletta:** Do you support the safety net, or would you scrap that?

**Murray:** Should we talk about the problems of getting there or should I simply say, here's the end state I'd like to see?

**Auletta:** The end state.

**Murray:** The end state is an American society in which there are no federal income supports at all for working-age healthy people.

**'It seems odd, but the Reagan administration is centrist. The cuts in social programs that the administration proposed are not draconian. There is no enthusiasm for striking out on new paths.'**

**Auletta:** Let me interrupt so that I can understand this. What about an 18-year-old working woman who dropped out of school to have a child and who wants to go to work but obviously doesn't have anyone to care for the child at home. Do you advocate support for that person?

**Murray:** I'm going to add a couple of statements to my last answer, then I'll come to that. I would like to see the system joined with one in which poor people have much greater access to education and training opportunities.

**Auletta:** Just so that we're clear on this, you're saying that for the non-able-bodied there is a safety net.

**Murray:** In effect, yes. I'm not sure what the best system would be for that. But it doesn't bother me to have that kind of system.

**Auletta:** When you're saying it doesn't bother you, it bothers me to hear you say that. Do you believe that it's an affirmative government responsibility to provide for those who are helpless, those who are not able-bodied?

**Murray:** What could bother me is this. A program for the disabled can easily become—and, I would argue, has easily become—as much a trap for people as the welfare system has. You hear street talk about the ways of playing games with disability insurance. You use a bad back to parlay yourself into something that ends up making you dependent when you didn't have to be. If you say to me that, at the federal level, you should help people who are physically or mentally disabled, my answer is "yes." It's damned tough to do so without creating more problems than you solve, but theoretically, "yes."

**Auletta:** Okay, what about that able-bodied young mother...

**‘We clearly siphon off a great deal of our concern and commitment [to the community] with the existing [welfare] system. If you get rid of that system, you are going to have a lot of people who have no rationalization for avoiding their commitments.’**

**Murray:** We’re now talking about my world, in which there is no federal system at all, and you’re saying that you have an 18-year-old woman who is ready and willing to go to work but has no access to child care at home. We have just described the person who historically has been the object of the community’s most tender concern. When AFDC was started back in the New Deal, it was popular at a time when you had all sorts of opposition to welfare. The reason it was popular was that it was designed to help young widows while their kids grew up. If you have a young woman in the community who is saying, “All I want is to support my family, and all I need from the community is day care,” there is going to be no shortage of local programs to provide that assistance where it’s needed.

**Auletta:** Charles, you know that in inner-city neighborhoods—whether it’s Washington, New York, or Cleveland—you don’t have that kind of infrastructure in the community.

**Murray:** You don’t have it now. But Ken, what makes you think that you aren’t going to have that, and have it in abundance, if you no longer have any of these programs coming down from above? We clearly siphon off a great deal of our concern and commitment with the existing system. And if you get rid of that system you are going to have an awful lot of people who have no rationalization for avoiding their commitments.

But there’s another point when you ask me about this 18-year-old woman. We can quibble about the likelihood that there is going to be a place for her. But whatever we decide, don’t compare my system with a zero-defect system. Compare my system and the number of people who splatter against the pavement with the one we have now. You can’t simply say, “If you follow Murray’s ideas you’re going to have massive suf-

fering among poor people in this country.” We have massive suffering among poor people in this country right this minute, and it’s a question of choosing the lesser evils.

**Auletta:** Isn’t it also a question of where your bias sits? That is to say, it’s almost an unprovable argument one way or the other. I can assert with equal force that more people will be hurt by your system than helped, or I could make just the reverse argument.

**Murray:** I’m not sure it’s unprovable. The contribution of *Losing Ground*, I hope, is to force people to ask certain kinds of questions that they have never asked. In the past how many analyses of black youth unemployment have we had? And how many of those analysts have been willing to go out in the street and ask why there’s unemployment, particularly when there are “help wanted” signs on that street? Why are they unemployed when they quit their last three jobs voluntarily?

**Auletta:** One of the reasons that some of the liberals reacted in a pained way to your book—although I must say I don’t think you were savaged in the way George Gilder was or the way Norman Podhoretz was savaged 15 or so years ago by his former friends—is that they worry that some of the arguments you marshal will be used by forces on the right, who will be much less reasonable, much more fanatical, than Charles Murray. Has the right abused the material?

**Murray:** I hear this all the time. People say, “You clearly aren’t a racist, and you clearly do worry about welfare and poor people. But these other folks are misusing what you said.” I’m told that the Reagan administration is using *Losing Ground* as justification for all sorts of social budget cuts. Has anyone ever heard anybody in the administration mention *Losing Ground*? I haven’t. Now, I won’t say that it has been an unblemished record. I’ve been on radio talk shows where I’ve had to say to the host, “Wait a minute. That’s not what I’m saying. Stop trying to make me out to be in support of such and such a position.”

**Auletta:** Like what?

**Murray:** Oh, that the welfare lines are filled with people trying to exploit the system and are living high on the hog. And it has gotten pretty racist too. But that hasn’t happened very often. One of the reactions by liberals to the book that has been most difficult to pin down, and the reason why so many people have been bothered by it, is ultimately linked to the racial issue. A great many of the reforms of the sixties were supposed to be for poor people. But what they real-

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# EFUND? WHAT REFUND?

*Why the IRS  
is screwing up*

by Paul M. Barrett

Even though he's been running the outfit since 1981, Ronald Reagan still gets away with denouncing Big Government. Prominent in the Reagan pantheon of bureaucratic villains is the Internal Revenue Service. The president has fumed over the IRS's "demeaning practices" and accused it of treating people's earnings as its "personal property." Campaigning for tax reform this spring, Reagan sounded as if he were endorsing popular defiance of the IRS's mission. The tax code, he said, "corrupts otherwise honest people by encouraging them to cheat. . . . After all, . . . what's immoral about cheating a system that is itself a cheat? This isn't a sin, it's a duty."

Sadly, the IRS actually lived up to Reagan's damning portrayal this year. Once considered one of the most efficient bureaucracies in town, the agency has turned into an incompetent bully. Without justification, liens were placed on property and bank accounts were frozen. Returns were lost, purposely misplaced, even destroyed. Refunds were months late, and when they didn't arrive at all, the IRS told taxpayers to start from scratch and refile. If this kind of bureaucratic behavior were directed toward criminal tax evaders, it might be understandable. But its victims are ordinary, honest people who deserve to be treated decently by their government.

Administration officials have attempted to write off the nightmarish filing season as a fluke—the result of a balky new computer. But far more important than any mechanical break-

down is the shift of attitudes and priorities that has taken place inside the Reagan IRS. While the agency's workload has grown tremendously, the administration has cut by more than 20 percent the staff that processes returns, answers taxpayers' questions, and gets refunds out on time. To compensate, IRS supervisors have enforced unrealistic work quotas that, in turn, have led to errors, low employee morale, and the improper destruction of documents. The result: worse service for loyal customers and widespread ill will toward government in general. Then again, to a president whose main enemy is Washington, and who seems to resent paying any taxes at all, that may not sound like such a bad combination.

## Don't call us, we'll call you

The first signals that 1985 would be the IRS's worst year ever came from Philadelphia, home to one of the agency's ten regional service centers. In January, businesses in several mid-Atlantic states served by the Philadelphia office began complaining about mysterious delinquency notices dispatched by the IRS computer. Threats to attach property followed, and at least five businesses had their assets impounded. By February it became clear that 27,000 corporate taxpayers had been mistakenly threatened because the IRS had lost track of \$300 million in payments for taxes withheld from employees' paychecks in 1984.

In the following months, thousands of people victimized by the Philadelphia center, which serves taxpayers in Washington, D.C., Maryland,

*Paul M. Barrett is an editor of The Washington Monthly. Peter Schmeisser assisted with research for this article.*