



Bob Carleson Made Welfare Reform Reagan's Lasting Legacy

by John Gizzi ([more by this author](#))

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“Young man, you’ll be President someday,” Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) told Ronald Reagan in 1968, after the governor of California decided to move from favorite son to full-fledged presidential candidate at the Republican National Convention. “But not this time.”

Thurmond was right. As much as Reagan had won the hearts of American conservatives with his solid principles and personal magnetism, he had been governor for less than two years, was only beginning to build a record in public policy and had started his presidential campaign very late.

In 1976 (when Reagan nearly won the Republican nomination) and in 1980 (when Thurmond’s prophecy was finally realized), the Californian had a substantive record to exploit on the national political stage. The achievement that particularly distinguished Reagan’s two terms as governor was welfare reform. Indeed, there is a strong case that without the welfare reform that rescued California from drowning in red ink in the early 1970s, Ronald Reagan would not have become President.

Gov. Reagan was definitely the father of genuine welfare reform in America -- the “tough love” concept of ending cash subsidies except for the truly needy and creating incentives with which those on welfare could find work and thus be freed from dependency.

And if Reagan was the father of these innovative reform concepts, then its midwife was Robert B. Carleson, his state director of social welfare. Now in a remarkable memoir titled [Government Is The Problem](#), the man known as “Reagan’s welfare reformer” tells just how the bold proposal that rescued California from a sea of red ink (and released hundreds of thousands from government dependency) came to be.

Published four years after Carleson’s death in 2006, [his book](#) is also a thoughtful

illustration of how inventive public policy can be applied on a state level and evolve into a national cause. The welfare reform that he and Reagan sculpted in California has been copied and implemented in numerous states, notably New York under Reagan's old political nemesis, liberal Republican Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, who took the advice of then-U.S. Commissioner of Welfare Carleson. Many of the revolutionary innovations that were developed in California were applied on a federal level in the 1980s, when Reagan was President and Carleson his special assistant for policy development.

With Carleson as their advisor, House Republicans in 1994 made welfare reform a key plank in the "Contract With America" they rode to a majority in the House for the first time in four decades. After twice vetoing it, President Clinton finally signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act on Aug. 22, 1996. The measure, recalled Carleson, "reversed 61 years of U.S. welfare policy, ending a recipient's entitlement to a welfare check." It also gave states finite block grants and greater leeway in dealing with their respective welfare burdens.

This success story began in 1971, when Reagan turned to Carleson to deal with California's welfare rolls, then swelling by 40,000 new cases per month. Carleson did not have a background in social work or welfare administration, but the former U.S. Naval officer and University of Southern California graduate had spent his adult life in public administration, serving as city manager of San Dimas, and Pico Rivera Calif., and chief deputy director of the state Department of Public Works.

Assembling a handful of fellow state officials who were also not from the public assistance culture, newly minted Social Welfare Director Carleson crafted a fresh agenda of administrative and regulatory reforms designed to 1) shut off the spigot of cash incentives to be on welfare rather than work and 2) ensure that any cash payments would go not to the able-bodied but those truly unable to work.

The results were striking. In 1974, three years after the welfare reform bill was passed, there were 850,000 fewer persons in California on family welfare and general assistance programs than projected by legislative experts in '71. Moreover, there was an absolute reduction of more than 300,000 in the Aid for Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) and general assistance rolls.

Along with valuable historical insight, Carleson's book provides some nuggets for the political junkie, ranging from how Gov. Reagan and his welfare chief used a "good cop, bad cop" routine with Democratic Assembly Speaker Bob Moretti to get his support for

the reform package (Carleson would call for Draconian measures, while Reagan would sound more conciliatory in calling for the package they actually wanted enacted) to how more moderate Republicans in the first Reagan White House staff -- notably Chief of Staff James Baker and his deputy Richard Darman -- were always trying to water down the measures Reagan and Carleson felt would slash welfare rolls nationwide and save millions of federal tax dollars.

Today, there is one notable exception among the overwhelming number of prominent political leaders who have accepted the concept pioneered by Reagan and Carleson: Barack Obama, who signed into law the stimulus package of 2009 that reversed the key components of the successful 1996 welfare reform package. Three years after Bob Carleson's death, the cash-for-dependency syndrome he had worked for so long to eradicate was on its way back and welfare reform as he and Ronald Reagan had crafted it had been gutted.

Before hundreds of thousands of citizens suffer and history begins its vindication, everyone should read Carleson's book so they can understand how to get welfare right once again.

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