

# Poverty: A Collective Difficulty a Collective Challenge

Randall L. Kennedy

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# POVERTY: A COLLECTIVE DIFFICULTY, A COLLECTIVE CHALLENGE

*Randall L. Kennedy*†

I would like to thank The Federalist Society for the opportunity to share some ideas. My premises are as follows. Our society is beset by major problems. The most urgent of these problems is poverty. This problem is a collective difficulty. It is not simply the problem of people in Southeast Washington, D.C., or South Central Los Angeles, or Roxbury, Massachusetts. It is *our* problem, a collective challenge—just like war constitutes a collective challenge. The poverty that envelopes so many of our fellow Americans should cause us pain. Moreover, apart from causing us moral pain, poverty should also give rise to alarm because the evils that typically accompany severe deprivation—crime, ignorance, resentment, etc.—pose a threat to us all. Another of my premises is that, with respect to what I have said thus far, there will be wide (though not total) agreement on this panel and within this audience.

Now for disagreement. Dr. Keyes makes the all too fashionable assertion that government intervention aimed at addressing poverty and its attendant problems is more harmful than helpful. He offers no evidence to substantiate his claim. Rather, falling victim to a tendency that besets many who feel that they are speaking to the converted, he simply announces conclusions. The fact of the matter is, however, that many thousands—many hundreds of thousands—of people have had their lives significantly bettered by the intervention of government assistance, especially assistance from the *federal* government. I speak particularly of interventions focused upon the elderly. In 1960, prior to the creation of the much maligned Great Society programs, one in every three persons over the age of 65 was impoverished. That poverty rate declined to one in four in 1970 and one in eight by 1987. Much of this progress is attributable to government intervention.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Keyes maintains that government must always attend to the basic humanity of the governed, that it ought never act in a way that diminishes individuals' capacities to use freedom enjoyably and productively. I, of course, agree with all of that; government programs

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† Professor of Law, Harvard University. J.D. Yale Law School, 1982.

<sup>1</sup> THEODORE R. MARMOR ET AL., *AMERICA'S MISUNDERSTOOD WELFARE STATE: PERSISTENT MYTHS, ENDURING REALITIES passim* (1990).

that have such consequences ought to be abolished (except, of course, if doing so would lead to even worse results such as death by starvation). What I would like for Dr. Keyes to do, however, is identify with particularity the programs that impose the harms about which he speaks. That would be far more useful than the overgeneralized condemnations that he has articulated thus far. Moreover, Dr. Keyes should go beyond merely recognizing that government programs, created with the best of intentions, *can* (not *must* but *can*) enslave people. He should also recognize that poverty, too, can enslave people. As that great American president Franklin D. Roosevelt declared: "Necessitous men are not free men."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to Congress, Jan. 11, 1944, cited in E. CORWIN, LIBERTY AGAINST GOVERNMENT 4 (1948).