

Will Hillary's 'Secretary Of Poverty' Solve Problems Of The Poor?

By Michael Medved

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Would the establishment of a new cabinet level "Department of Poverty" enable the government to cure, finally, the frustrations and hardships of America's poor?

Hillary Clinton apparently believes that it would, and thereby illustrates the vapidness and illogic at the very core of contemporary liberalism.

In a Memphis speech meant to honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, the New York Senator and Presidential candidate claimed that she, too, had a dream.

"I believe we should appoint a cabinet level position that will be solely and fully devoted to ending poverty as we know it in America," she solemnly intoned. "A position that will focus the attention of our nation on the issue and never let it go. A person who I could see being asked by the president every single day what have you done to end poverty in America? No more excuses. No more whining, but instead a concerted effort."

The media largely ignored her proposal but her former rival John Edwards applauded it. His formal reaction declared: "America's need to address the great moral issue of poverty demands strong action and a cabinet level poverty position is exactly that kind of action."

Creating a new job in government amounts to "strong action"?

Mr. Edwards can't be serious. The only American to feel the impact of such "action" would be the individual hired to fill the job.

The entire proposal highlights the Democratic Party's current addiction to the politics of gesture dictated by the "Do Something Disease." Under the grip of that dread malady, public figures feel the compulsion to stage a response to any perceived problem – even if that reaction accomplishes nothing in terms of meaningful solutions.

The Do Something Disease compels posturing that shows off the compassion of politicians, rather than policies that actually improve the lives of afflicted citizens. Results don't matter, as long as the leader manages to demonstrate concern. Good intentions—feelings-- count for everything, with no consideration of real world consequences.

If nothing else, these high-minded, low-impact initiatives may lead the public to shrug: "At least they tried to help the situation. It's better than doing nothing."

Consider the last time we focused on the goal of eradicating poverty across the country: Lyndon Johnson's "War On Poverty" cost an estimated five trillion dollars over the course of thirty years but, as President Reagan suggested: "We fought a war on poverty. And poverty won."

Similarly, the Carter Administration (in one of its many triumphal "reforms" of domestic and foreign policy) established the United States Department of Education in 1979 – a bureaucratic monstrosity that now employs 5,000 hard-working officials and spends nearly \$70 billion a year of the people's money. Would anyone suggest that this new "cabinet level department" solved the problems in American education?

Yet Senator Clinton clings to the touchingly naive belief that creating a similar department to cure poverty will bring every last American into the middle class with "no more excuses" and "no more whining."

Her promise to "end poverty as we know it" deliberately echoes her husband's 1992 pledge to "end welfare as we know it" – a pledge realized, thanks to the Gingrich-controlled Congress, in 1996. There's a key difference, however: ending "welfare as we know it" meant terminating a government program, which is an undertaking well within the power of public officials. Ending poverty, however, means altering part of the human condition –

which governments may attempt, but never can achieve.

No Secretary of Poverty, for instance, no matter how dedicated or talented or lavishly funded, will be able to prevent suffering for a fourteen year old girl who gives birth to a baby and drops out of high school while functionally illiterate. This same official will similarly fail to rescue a heroin addict and gang member who goes to jail for burglary and assault, and returns to a life of drugs and crime upon his release. An unskilled new immigrant with six children (even if all of them enter the country legally, with proper documentation) may need to go through several years (at least) of poverty, despite official determination to end inequality. There's also little chance to give security to a family with small children whose father gambles away all resources at local casinos, even while compiling prodigious credit card debt to live above his means.

In other words, much of today's poverty stems from bad choices and self-destructive behavior, rather than a lack of bureaucratic attention. The president may hector a new Secretary of Poverty (and every other Cabinet official, for that matter) with the daily question "what have you done today to end poverty in America," but it's safe to assume that poverty still won't end. It's a relative status in any event: today's "poor"-- with their cell phones, color TV's, DVD players, air conditioners, cars, Medicaid, free lunches and food stamps -- would have been considered middle class some fifty years ago.

At a time of looming bankruptcy for Medicare and Social Security, the apparently straight-faced idea of launching yet another cabinet department (to complement other worthy recent additions like the briskly efficient Departments of Energy, Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, Veterans Affairs and more) qualifies as a form of lunacy.

But then we've already got a Secretary of Health and Human Services to deal with such craziness.

*Michael Medved, nationally syndicated talk radio host, is author of 10 non-fiction books, including **The Shadow Presidents** and **Right Turns**.*

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