

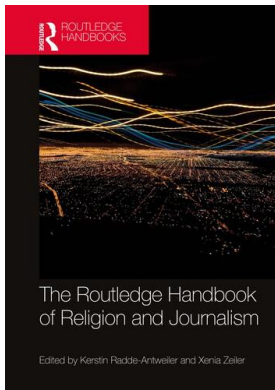
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 31 May 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Journalism

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Race, religion and the news

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203731420-9>

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Published online on: 30 Oct 2020

How to cite :- Diane Winston. 30 Oct 2020, *Race, religion and the news from: The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Journalism* Routledge

Accessed on: 31 May 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203731420-9>

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6

RACE, RELIGION AND THE NEWS

The Reagan administration and the fairness issue

Diane Winston

Introduction

On December 8, 1983, presidential counselor Edwin Meese III met with reporters from Reuters, the Associated Press and United Press International. One of the journalists asked Meese how he balanced the need for spending reductions with the plight of hungry children. “Well I don’t know of any authoritative figures that there are hungry children” (Associated Press 1983b, 13b), he replied. Adding that “virtually everyone is taken care of by one program or another” (Associated Press 1983b, 13b), Meese seemed more perturbed that free-loaders might be bilking the system than by the prospect of starving children, “We’ve had information that people go to soup kitchens because the food is free and that’s easier than paying for it” (Associated Press 1983b, 13b).

At another time of year, Meese’s remarks might have passed unnoticed, but two weeks before Christmas on a slow news Saturday, his comments made headlines. The *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* were just three of the national newspapers that put the story on page one. “Critics growl over Meese hunger remarks” (Rowley 1983, 1) the *Tribune* punned in an above-the-fold banner headline. The *Post*, likewise, ran the story at the top of page one proclaiming “Discussing Hunger in the U.S., Meese Sparks a Firestorm” (Hoffman 1983b, 1a). Among the big metropolitan dailies, only the *New York Times* slotted the Meese story midway in first section.

For the rest of the year, Meese’s statements remained news. The story snowballed into features about hunger in America, soup kitchens and their clientele, and the likelihood that Meese’s comments also reflected the mindset of President Ronald Reagan. Underlying the coverage and specifically addressed in op-eds and editorials were questions about civic values. What is society’s responsibility to the poor? Are some of the poor more deserving than others? What constitutes equality? How to gauge fairness? What constitutes a good society?

Such questions also troubled reporters. A majority of news stories, despite aiming for balance and objectivity, seemed slanted against Meese. Journalists did not call him heartless, but the structure, sourcing and framing of their work implied as much. Editorialists, on the other hand, openly expressed their opinions. Three years of frustration over budget cuts found a perfect foil in Meese’s skepticism about hunger in the USA.

This chapter focuses on the relationship among power, journalism and religion in the USA. It uses Meese's remarks to examine the political, economic and moral nexus of Reagan's ideology and its depiction by the news media as an example for the interconnectivity and the influence of religion and journalism. The triangulation of religion, the news media and politics is a relatively undeveloped field of research. Domke (2004) has studied how the administration of President George W. Bush used religious language to rally public support for the War on Terror through the echoing press, and several scholarly articles have explored coverage of the Religious Right (Winston 2007, 2012). Recent research in the USA and Europe has focused on the reporting of political Islam and its impact on the representation of Muslims (Said 1997, Fārūqī 2009, Rane, Ewart and Martinkus 2014, Mertensm and de Smaele 2016, Lundby et al. 2017). In contrast to that, I work on a larger project about Reagan, religion and the news media. I argue that Reagan's ideas about religion influenced his political positions.

By religion, I mean evangelical Christianity; specifically, conservative Christian beliefs not only about the need to accept Jesus as a personal savior, the reality of Heaven and Hell, and the inerrancy of the Bible, but also about politics and society, such as the unborn's right to life, support for Israel, the importance of a free-market economy, the desirability of limited government and the need for traditional heterosexual families. Reagan was a lifelong Christian. Over the years, he cited as inspirations his mother's strong faith, his matriculation at a Christian college and his baptism after reading *The Printer of Udell's* (Wright and Gilbert 1911) an inspirational novel. During his years in Los Angeles, he worshipped at the conservative Bel-Air Presbyterian church, and fellowshipped with a group of Christian luminaries, including entertainer Pat Boone, Pentecostal pastor Harold Bredesen and former football star Don Moomaw, Bel Air's minister. During his successful 1966 gubernatorial campaign, Reagan let it be known that he had had a born-again experience. According to historian Darren Dochuk, Reagan confirmed press reports of his "spiritual conversion" in a 1967 interview,

I can't conceive of anyone trying to meet the problems we face today without help from God. I have spent more time in prayer these past few weeks than I have in any previous period I recall.

(Dochuk 2011, 263)

The 1980s press corps, however, rarely probed the president's personal religiosity. Few accounts detailed his immersion in Southern California's evangelical community, much less his lifelong relationship to the church, although some reporters did question why Reagan rarely went to worship services. Instead, journalists explored how his faith served his political purposes, following the standard practice of covering religion functionally, as politically instrumental for setting agendas and wooing constituencies, rather than substantively, as an autonomous phenomenon or, in other words, a conviction that provides believers with meaning, identity and purpose. This shortcoming was highlighted with the 2018 discovery of a personal letter that Reagan wrote to his father-in-law, Loyal Davis (Tumulty 2018). Davis, an atheist, was dying and Reagan, who was president at the time, described the importance of faith. There is no mistaking the depth of Reagan's belief in this private missive.

This chapter is based on the idea that Reagan's religiously informed ideas about poverty influenced his economic policies. Reagan believed in the importance of family for instilling financial responsibility. He trusted that the free market economy and limited governmental interference would create the conditions that enabled responsible people to support their families. By focusing on journalistic reporting about tax cuts, welfare and fairness that

preceded Meese's comments, the chapter entails how that newspapers' coverage contributed to changing notions about race and religion, political fairness and personal responsibility. Meese's remarks reflect a longstanding debate in American religion and philanthropy: the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. The Reagan administration successfully sought news coverage that reframed this debate to highlight the role of race and gender in poverty.

Media matters

According to researchers (McCombs and Shaw 1993, Bowe, Fahmy and Wanta 2013, McCombs 2014), news media establishes agendas, informs public opinion, influences policy and confirms ingrained perspectives. That is because the news media provides frames for thinking about issues, such as race, gender and poverty. The primary source for framing is elite discourse: speeches and other cultural products from government, corporate, entertainment, religious and social leaders. The American president is an example for that, because he commands pride of place in news making, and in the 1980s, the Reagan administration's policies, speeches and activities were central to determining the news agenda. However, a distinctive confluence of religious, political and economic trends, coupled with Reagan's powerful skills as a storyteller, made his presidency distinctive. Reagan's bully pulpit, amplified by the media, led to the circulation of ideas, images and arguments that would have received little or no airing under previous administrations. Thus, even if Americans did not agree with Reagan's budget cuts or his rationale for them, they knew that his priorities were important because he was the president. For others, Reagan's conservative priorities dovetailed with opinions that were previously unexpressed in most public forums.

In the midst of the Great Society initiative, President Lyndon B. Johnson's legislative program to combat poverty, many Americans were leery of undeserving, able-bodied men and women cheating the system. With the Civil Rights movement in the forefront of the news however, the racial undertones of many such suspicions were difficult to ignore. Fifteen years later, when Reagan framed these perceptions as national problems that reflected a crisis that was spiritual as much as economic, he legitimated a subterranean swath of popular opinion. Moreover, through repetition in the news media, those opinions were mainstreamed.

In addition to framing poverty as a moral and spiritual issue best remedied by work, family and self-sufficiency, Reagan's words and like-minded discourse constructed poverty as a race and gender problem. Pervasive racism and sexism made minorities, especially African Americans, the face of the urban and undeserving poor. Poor black men were "threatening and violent" (Bullock, Wyche and Williams 2001, 229–246) while single black mothers were "immoral and neglectful" (Bullock, Wyche and Williams 2001, 226–246). Still, even if blacks received a disproportionate amount of federal assistance, they did not comprise the majority of America's poor. Yet "media images emphasizing the relationship between poverty and ethnicity clearly fuel[ed] the perception that most poor people are African American" (Bullock, Wyche and Williams 2001, 226–246) and "led directly to public misconceptions of the poor and a decrease in public support" (Rose and Baumgartner 2013, 22–53).

The 1960s notion that poverty is a systemic problem requiring government intervention was reframed in the Reagan era as a problem of personal choice that required personal change. Integral to solving that problem was the individual's commitment to strengthening his or her family and to achieving self-sufficiency (Rose and Baumgartner 2013). Those who did not try to solve their own problems did not deserve sympathy, much less aid. The news as well as the entertainment media conveyed this message with

[f]raming techniques that present poverty as an individual problem rather than a societal issue rooted in economic and political inequality that further reinforce the perceived undeservedness of the poor.

(Bullock, Williams and Limbert 2003, 237)

Reagan's economic plans

After the 1980 election, Reagan faced a troubled economy. The long postwar boom had ended, replaced by high unemployment, rising inflation and a stagnant GDP. For the 40th president, fixing the economy was more than solving these problems. Reagan wanted to operationalize his conviction that America's God-given freedom meant each citizen was personally responsible for himself and his family. Reagan's goal was to create a healthy economy that reaffirmed the values of family, self-reliance and the free market. This was the reason why he called for tax cuts that would force reductions in welfare programs. He explained what could be called spiritual neoliberalism in a December 1983 radio address:

Families stand at the center of society, so building our future must begin by preserving family values . . . How can families survive when big government's powers to tax, inflate, and regulate absorb their wealth, usurp their rights, and crush their spirit?

(Reagan 1983b)

Press coverage of Reagan's ideas about family values, welfare and big government were telegraphed in sound bites that seemed stacked against single-parent families, especially poor ones headed by women of color. Journalists routinely played up comments that they deemed would have the greatest traction with their audiences. Frequently that meant lifting up conflict or pitting groups against one another. Stories explored whether the president favored the rich over the poor and if the country was worse off now than when he took office. Reporters could not directly critique Reagan's arguments or even his policies since professional conventions required them to maintain standards of balance and objectivity. Still, the very act of framing stories around the president's alleged insensitivity to poverty, usually by highlighting his critics, was a way to show their hand.

However, the law of unintended consequences, facilitated by the repetition of certain themes, may have caused the opposite reaction to the one that reporters sought. Repeating Reagan's message – thus normalizing his ideas about personal responsibility, the debilitating effects of government handouts, and the creation of an indolent underclass – hardened public attitudes about the nation's responsibility to the poor. Reagan sought to convince his countrymen that spiritual and economic renewal went hand-in-hand and that belief in the free market system and personal responsibility were key to both (Kunde et al. 2012).

Yet that outcome was far from journalists' minds when Meese doubted the existence of hungry Americans. His remarks focused the press on issues of hunger and fairness, topics central to news coverage ever since Reagan proposed tax cuts that would drastically reduce federal aid programs. For more than a year, the administration and its critics vied to control the narrative about the impact of budget reductions. Much of the coverage was framed by the fairness issue, the contention that cuts were unfair to all Americans except the very wealthy. Political strategists initially deemed fairness – Reagan's alleged tilt to the wealthy at the expense of the poor – to be the president's Achilles' heel, and the Democrats' strongest suit for winning back the White House. Nevertheless, the Administration countered

by identifying fairness with undeserving others, and by the end of 1983, some Americans wondered whether fairness was actually a demand for preferential treatment by minorities.

Reforming welfare

By the mid-1960s, many Americans felt that the welfare system, rooted in the New Deal and expanded over the next four decades, needed reform (O'Connor 1998, Steensland 2011, Stoesz and Karger 1993). Despite a growing number of government programs aimed at ending poverty, the effects of indigence – teen births, high school dropout rates, drug and alcohol abuse, hunger, homelessness and crime – were on the rise. Critics on the left wondered if the raft of government benefits missed the point or merely failed to reach enough people. As the debate continued through the 1970s, moderate policymakers and elected officials, both Republican and Democrat, decided that a guaranteed annual income would reach more citizens, offer more security and end the stigma attached to receiving welfare. Conservatives, however, disagreed. Rebutting the claim that welfare did too little, they said it did too much and at too high a price. At best, welfare created an underclass of men and women unwilling to work. At worst, it enabled scofflaws and cheaters to take advantage of a flawed system. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, stories about welfare frauds were a journalistic staple. Among the most popular were narratives about unwed mothers who milked the system with fraudulent claims and then used AFDC money for drugs and alcohol. The mothers, typically African Americans, not only fueled racial stereotypes but also struck deep chords of religiously based sexism that depicted the women as deceptive, promiscuous and unreliable.

Reagan repeatedly told the story of one such cheater during his unsuccessful 1976 bid for the Republican presidential nomination. He recounted a tale, initially reported in the Chicago press, of a woman

who used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four non-existent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free income alone has been running \$150,000 a year.

(Leven 2013)

Using the moniker popularized by the Chicago press, Reagan called the woman a welfare queen. The term became a cultural meme and, in the popular imagination, Reagan was credited as its source (Fialka 1976, 7a). Notwithstanding the story's veracity or whether this degree of fraud was widespread, the welfare queen captured the public's imagination and negatively influenced perceptions about race, gender and welfare for years to come (Gilliam 1999).

If Reagan's story about the welfare queen could become commonsensical, it was because many Americans were primed to believe the worst about the poor, in general, and African-American welfare recipients, in particular. Black poverty had been identified as a national problem during the 1960s. What was previously hidden had been revealed by magazine spreads on the rural poor; books such as Harrington's *The Other America* (1965) and organized protests including Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign. After his election in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson pledged to expand economic opportunities for all American as well as to further the goals of the Civil Rights movement. Declaring a War on Poverty, Johnson promised a Great Society that would be achieved through jobs programs and vocational training; community-based aid, low income housing; funding for low-income schools; food stamps, and medical assistance for the elderly and the poor. It was the most ambitious social welfare legislation since the New Deal.

Johnson's Great Society represented a significant shift from earlier social programs (Quadagno 1994). It was "an effort to eliminate the racial barriers of the New Deal and to integrate Blacks into the national political economy" (Roberts 1996, 1563–1602). Eager to make the new system work for all people, welfare rights activists campaigned to register African American single mothers for benefits. Their efforts were successful and "by 1967, a welfare caseload that had once been eighty-six percent white had become forty-six percent nonwhite" (Roberts 1996, 1563–1602). In hard numbers, this meant that by 1969, the number of Americans on welfare went from four million, earlier in the decade, to six million (Danziger 1998). Both the increase in recipients and the rising percentage of Blacks resulted in calls for reform. White Americans worried that Blacks were 'taking advantage.' Calls for reform grew acute during the Carter era, because as the economic recession spread, welfare rolls spiked. By the mid-1970s, the number of recipients had grown from 6 million to 11 million, while those receiving food stamps had risen from 1 million (in 1969) to 19 million (Danziger 1998).

One of welfare's most vehement critics was Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan. Reagan made things simple. During the primaries, he promised tax cuts. However, during the campaign, he discussed welfare reform. For Reagan, the two went hand-in-hand. If tax receipts fell, then government programs would be reduced. As governor of California, Reagan had overhauled the state's welfare system. Now he wanted to do the same for the nation. The result would be less government waste, more capital investment, increased consumer spending and the replacement of a federally funded underclass with productive citizens. It was a plan that played well in an election year when inflation was considered the nation's #1 problem (Prasad 2012).

Soon after his election, Reagan set his budget program into motion. A key goal was to reduce the high levels of federal spending that fueled inflation. As Reagan noted in his inaugural speech, "government is not the solution to our problem: government is the problem" (Weisman 1981, 1a). Several months later, he proposed legislation to cut back payments to the working poor and to encourage states to develop workfare programs. The administration intended to force recipients off welfare, but results were mixed (Pear 1983a). Some did leave the program, others left but came back and still others had no choice but to stay on welfare since jobs were hard to find. Unemployment was a real problem. In January 1983, almost 18 months after the tax cuts became law, the national unemployment rate was 10.4% (Norris 2011), and a majority of Americans was dissatisfied with the Reagan's progress on the economy.

According to a *New York Times*-CBS poll, (New York Times News Service 1983, 6) approval for Reagan's job performance hit a low of 41% and just 35% of those surveyed thought he was "in control of his administration" (New York Times News Service 1983, 6). The key issue for many was the president's inability to improve job numbers. Americans also were unhappy with the growing federal deficit, but even so 75% were willing to incur greater debt if it enabled the creation of new jobs (New York Times News Service 1983, 6). Reagan had a different opinion, and his 1984 budget, which was presented to Congress just days after the January 1983 poll, called for further cutbacks in social programs, including reductions in food assistance for needy children, food stamp eligibility and health insurance and medical assistance for the elderly (Pear 1983b). Several months later, the Congressional Budget Office reported that cuts in social programs, which would save \$110 billion between fiscal 1982 and 1985, fell hardest on families with yearly incomes under \$20,000. However, poor families were not alone in their economic distress. Newspapers cited a study by the AFL-CIO Public Employees Department that noted federal tax cuts resulted in higher state and local taxes, federal gasoline taxes and Social Security's payroll withholdings for

“average-income Americans” (Associated Press 1984, 5a). In other words, despite federal tax cuts, many Americans were paying more in taxes.

Reagan’s critics made the most of the numbers. Columnist Michael Kinsley posed the question that had won Reagan support in the 1980 campaign, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” (Commission on Presidential Debates 1980) Kinsley’s answer was no. Average workers’ weekly earnings were down 3%, the gross national product was barely higher than in 1981, and tax cuts had grown the federal deficit and enriched the upper classes but accomplished little else (TRB 1983). Millions of workers, mostly men over 50 who were employed in factories, lost jobs to automation and foreign competition. Now they were unable to find work at their previous salaries, if at all (Serrin 1983). When the *Washington Post* reported that Reagan’s “ambitious domestic agenda” was “being put on hold” (Hoffman 1983a, 3a) as the White House prepared for the 1984 presidential run, few were surprised. A former Reagan economic advisor said that with an election looming, “the administration’s economic policy is to do nothing and pray the recovery continues” (Hoffman 1983a, 3a).

Miraculously, those prayers were answered by fall. Even the Midwest, the nation’s ailing industrial center, was bouncing back. When Reagan addressed the International Monetary Fund, he reiterated his vision of a political system that trusts in the market to promote and ensure human freedom. He offered thinly veiled criticism of Communism’s subjugation of the individual, and he questioned the wisdom of previous presidents who seemed to place their trust in American government rather than in the nation’s citizens. Rejecting the misguided policies of 1970s, which “permitted our governments to overspend, overtax and overregulate us toward soaring inflation and record interest rates” (Reagan 1983c, 1362–1366), he said his administration placed its faith in “the magic of the market place” (Reagan 1983c, 1362–1366) and the “human spirit” (Reagan 1983c, 1362–1366).

By winter, a *Los Angeles Times* poll found a majority of Americans believed Reagan’s economic plan was working. Sixty-three percent called it a success, and 52% said they were better off than when he took office (Treadwell 1983, 1b). The president’s job approval rating had soared to 61%, a strong comeback from numbers earlier in the year. The poll also revealed an interesting inconsistency. Support for the president’s efforts was up, but backing for his programs was down. Americans did not want further cutbacks on social programs or more reductions in governmental regulations. According to the newspaper, Reagan’s approval ratings were tied to the success of his program, not its merits.

By a ratio of almost 2 to 1, the poll shows that those who support Reagan’s economic ideas do so because his ideas seem to be working—not because they believe the ideas are right.

(Treadwell 1983, 1b)

That pragmatism was based on results: Productivity, retail sales and investments were up, and the stock market was bullish. However, not all signs were strong. The \$200 billion federal deficit remained a problem, as did high unemployment and job dislocations caused by a national shift from manufacturing to service industries and technology. There were other worries too, reported the *New York Times*:

As ever, young blacks accounted for a disproportionate part of the unemployed. Their continuing distress stood in dismaying contrast to the year’s symbols of black achievement: a black astronaut, a black Miss America, a black Mayor of Chicago and a black contender for President.

(*New York Times* 1983, 10b)

In an otherwise typical *New York Times* article, uncluttered by adjectives and modifying phrases, these two sentences stood out. While they were factually correct, their construction was striking, reinforcing the very problem that they addressed. The words “As ever,” distress and dismay in the sentence implied that young blacks were an ongoing problem. Even at a moment when some African Americans had shown they could do anything – run for president, win beauty pageants or conquer the stars – many other “young blacks” did not have jobs. That many remained unemployed while some found ways to break barriers created a “dismaying contrast,” because their “distress,” one might infer, might be self-inflicted.

Race and fairness

Even if the *Times* had uncharacteristically faulted poor blacks for their situation, most readers likely would not have noticed. The casual racism that underlay the newspaper’s descriptions likely struck many as commonsensical: There was a large percentage of young blacks on welfare at the same time that new opportunities were opening up for African Americans. In fact, readers of the *Times*, as well as its critics, likely labeled the paper liberal. Similar to many news outlets, the paper of record had paid close attention to the fairness issue ever since it became a factor in the 1982 midterm election. Between January 1982 and December 1983, four major newspapers – the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* – ran more than 120 stories on the fairness issue, with peaks before the 1982 midterm elections, during the summer of 1983 and in December (coinciding with Meese’s remarks on hunger) (Proquest Search 2015). By virtue of the stories’ presentation, laying out charges that the tax cuts were unfair and then offering the Administration’s argument, much of the coverage could appear biased against the president’s program.

The fairness issue emerged when the public realized the ramifications of tax cuts on a wide swath of social welfare programs. Reducing funds for hungry children and single mothers seemed wrong to many, especially when the savings provided a windfall for the rich. Reagan and his advisors were so unsettled by accusations that he was insensitive to the poor that they launched their own fairness offensive in March 1982. At every public appearance, Reagan assured listeners that he was not only compassionate but also offended by accusations otherwise. He favored helping the truly needy, people who could not help themselves, and he pledged that tax cuts would create jobs for “average citizens” (Cannon 1982). Nevertheless, the president’s seeming lack of fairness to the poor struck many Americans as misguided, and budget cuts became a hot button issue when Democrats realized their impact on working- and middle-class voters. Appropriating the term for the 1982 mid-term elections, the Democrats turned the label fairness into a trope that telegraphed the president’s tilt to the rich at the expense of the average Joe.

The party’s messaging played on class antagonisms to gain ground with white working- and middle-class voters who did not approve of Reagan’s affluent lifestyle and his reductions in programs that helped them, such as student loans, mass transit and services for the elderly (Roberts 1982). The strategy worked: On Election Day, the GOP suffered one of its biggest losses in decades. Twenty-six Democratic congressmen replaced 26 Republicans. The Democrats’ edge in the House grew from 243–192 to 269–166, and although they were a 47–53 minority in the Senate, Democrats had increased their ranks by one. Many observers ascribed the Republicans’ loss not just to the weak economy but also to the fairness issue (Baltz and Hornblower 1982).

Reagan’s handlers realized they needed to reframe the debate. Throughout 1983, they found different ways to talk about fairness so it assumed the class, racial and gender dimensions, which, in much of the subsequent media coverage, suggested those most hurt by tax

cuts were poor, black single mothers. Reagan and his team used a variety of strategies, alternately drawing on numbers, history and stereotyping to show that the president's programs were fair and that the Democrats were the real culprits. They had mixed success. David Stockman, head of the Office of Management and Budget and a key proponent of Reagan's economic program, testified to the Congressional Joint Economic Committee on the fairness of the administration's economic policies. He claimed that tax cuts had a minimal impact on the poor, did not affect the truly needy and barely benefited the well-to-do. Soon after, a lengthy op-ed in the *Washington Post* by Robert Greenstein, director of a non-profit budget and policy center, demolished Stockman's figures in wonky detail (Greenstein 1983).

Reagan, too, used numbers to defend his policies, but he also invoked the past, especially the mistakes of his predecessors. The president previously disparaged the Democrats' philosophy, now he launched a vigorous attack on Lyndon B. Johnson's mid-1960s programs. LBJ's Great Society sought to end poverty and racial discrimination, but the buildup of government giveaways had the opposite effect, said Reagan. It had "contributed to family break-ups, welfare dependency, and a large increase of births out of wedlock" (Reagan 1983a). Moreover, LBJ's initiatives "had destroyed the economy and made Americans poorer than they were 15 years ago" (Reagan 1983a). The root of the problem, concluded the current president, was the Democrats' belief that "'government and bureaucracy' were 'the primary vehicle for social change.'" (Reagan 1983a).

Throughout the year, Reagan and his supporters blamed the *Great Society* initiative not only for destroying the economy, but also for causing the disintegration of poor families and the enrichment of government bureaucrats. He also blamed the current crop of politicians who supported big government programs, and the freeloaders who exploited them. His final target was the press, and Reagan inveighed against "the drum beat of doom and gloom from the misery merchants in some of the media" (Associated Press 1983a, 23). The economy was improving "[c]ontrary to the propaganda blasts you hear" (Reagan 1983b), and his administration was "committed to fairness" (Reagan 1983b).

Republicans could play with numbers, berate Democrats and complain about press coverage to bolster their claims, but the real turning point came when they gave welfare a human face. Democrats had tried to make fairness an issue that cut across racial, gender and class lines. The tax cuts were as unfair to white autoworkers as they were to black women on welfare as they were to middle-class Asian students who lost their college loans. But when the Census Bureau released figures on poverty, showing a rapidly increasing number of women and children in need, the administration, according to the *Washington Post*, embraced "a new defense of the domestic spending cuts that have embroiled the president in the 'fairness issue'" (Williams 1983, 4a). The new defense asserted that the problem of poverty, especially in the African American community, resulted from the prevalence of female-headed households. The breakdown of the black family, according to this theory, was beyond the government's control. If anything, government programs had made the problem worse.

This was not an entirely new strategy. Reagan previously used stereotypes to deprecate African Americans and to question their dependence on welfare. In his aborted 1976 presidential campaign, he had castigated the strapping young buck (a pejorative Southern term for a black man) who used food stamps to buy steaks. Nevertheless, since the 1980 election, he was more circumspect, blaming government programs and greedy politicians for welfare fraud. Rather than raise negative stereotypes about cheaters, Reagan said that blacks had fallen into a culture of dependency that was destroying not just an individual's moral fiber but also the well-being of the entire black community and, by extension, the nation. His actions to end the culture of poverty would be their salvation.

The Census Report provided cover for going a step further. According to its most recent survey (White and Reaves 1983, 1), 15% of Americans lived in poverty, the highest number since 1965, when the Great Society programs began (Williams 1983, 4a). The fastest-growing segment of the impoverished population was female-headed households, which represented 46% of poor families. (In 1960, women headed 24% of families living below the poverty line.) While it was not unusual to see the poverty rate rise during a severe recession, government officials as well as independent researchers said that the typical bounce back might not help women on welfare, who often lacked job skills and, if they had young children, could not work full-time. According to Bruce Chapman, a White House staff member and former head of the Census Bureau, “fatherless families represent ‘an underclass [that] an expanding economy won’t reach’” (Bacon 1983, 1).

Echoing Chapman, other Reagan appointees told the *Washington Post* that female-headed households were a serious problem and could result in a “permanent underclass” (Williams 1983, 4a). Overall, one in seven American families were female headed, but among the African Americans, the ratio was almost one in two. Women headed 46% of poor families, and a disproportionate number of those families were African American. According to the president, the best solution was to end programs “that increase dependency and break up families” (Williams 1983, 4a). A year earlier, Reagan had told a gathering of black Republicans “that blacks ‘would be appreciably better off today’ if the Great Society had never been inaugurated” (Weisman 1982, 1a). and that government programs had led to “a new kind of bondage” (Weisman 1982) for those on welfare. Others, however, said that the swelling numbers showed the need for more support, not less, and revealed an imperative to renew federal emphasis on job training programs (Williams 1983).

The politics of fairness, by virtue of media coverage that focused on the president and administration officials, increasingly spotlighted the plight of black Americans; specifically, poor, female-headed African American households. Even when fairness was not mentioned, it hovered between the lines, prompting readers to wonder who was responsible: Were Reagan’s programs unfair, or was Johnson the real culprit? Was it fair for blacks to depend on government (e.g., whites’) support? Was it wrong for wealthy Americans to allow the less fortunate to languish in poverty?

This new twist on the so-called problem of black Americans made for compelling news stories that played on deep currents of racism. It also tapped into middle class ambivalence about the impact of Reagan’s economic strategy on the poor. Yet regardless of which way the narrative in a given story tilted, most of the reportage served to widen the gap between *us* and *them*. Citing the increased prevalence of divorce and single parent households among black Americans, the *Chicago Tribune* predicted that

[t]he break-up of the black family threatens to undermine much of the progress blacks have made in education, health care, nutrition and politics. It almost certainly will affect crime rates, drug use, welfare and even the religious habits of black America.

(White and Reaves 1983, 1)

The front-page article used census statistics to show that African American children in female-headed homes were economically handicapped. Describing a culture of poverty that destroyed children’s sense of self-worth, the reporter outlined how poverty leads to crime, drug use, unemployment and the loss of a religious compass. Blacks who did find a way out and joined the middle class would, as likely as not, turn their backs on those less fortunate.

When the *Washington Post* did its own series on black families, it focused on “the leading edge of the fairness issue” (Coleman 1983, 1a) cuts in spending for the poor and their particular effect on African Americans. Like the *Tribune*, the *Post* had many numbers: One in three blacks lived below the poverty line, one in four were on Medicaid and on food stamps, one in five collected AFDC and one in seven lived in federally subsidized housing. Blacks also suffered from reductions in smaller government programs including student aid, child nutrition and job training. The takeaway? “[B]lacks are much more reliant on federal aid than is generally realized” (Coleman 1983, 1a), which is why budget cuts “had a far greater impact on black than white Americans” (Coleman 1983, 1a).

Reagan’s justification for cuts – a healthy economy would create jobs for the poor – was cited as a rationale for change, but the *Post* noted that the defense budget had grown, and middle-class programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, were hardly touched. The obvious implication was that people with resources could protect their entitlements in ways that the poor could not. Reagan’s proxies told reporters that cuts were not made with the intention of hurting blacks but because welfare did more harm than good and that the welfare system was beset by problems. The bottom line, they said, was that government programs should focus on the truly needy. That sentiment was shared widely. Polls showed that Americans were concerned about unfairness (Harris 1982), but they cared most about their own well-being. As one of Reagan’s political managers noted,

If people have got jobs, can make their house payments and keep the kids in college, they’re not going to worry about fairness.

(Kondracke 1983, 13a).

Despite widespread public doubt about the fairness of Reagan’s tax cuts – 56% agreed “the elderly, the poor, and the handicapped have been especially hard hit, while the rich and big business have been much better off” (Harris 1984) – he was re-elected in 1984 with a whopping 58.8% majority. Voters preferred an incumbent who lowered inflation and unemployment (Lipset 1985) to a challenger who promised fairness. Moreover, many had become skeptical, even cynical, about the plight of the poor. Even though they agreed that Reagan’s cuts had been hardest on disadvantaged groups, they did not necessarily want to do anything about it. According to a 1985 DNC survey, the term fairness had developed a negative connotation, a code word for giveaways (Lipset 1985).

For many middle-class voters, fairness no longer applied to them and reductions in *their* government programs. Rather it referred to poor people who wanted something for nothing. That this perspective could become normative in a relatively short time was, according to some scholars, due in part to the media’s “potential to educate, raise consciousness, and shape public attitudes” (Bullock, Wyche and Williams 2001, 229).

Hunger and an election year

At the start of 1983, Reagan’s advisors began defusing the fairness issue. They wanted to improve the president’s standing among women and blacks as well as to bolster his support among white working- and middle-class men. Their strategy “was to platonize the problem, describing it as a matter of perception separate from reality” (Clines 1983, 4e). Throughout the year, Reagan and his team did just that, arguing that the budget cuts were anything but unfair. Poverty? The Democrats created the problem, but Reagan was fixing it. Hunger? More people than ever received assistance, and there were programs for anyone who needed help.

Unemployment? Again, the Democrats' fault, but the economic recovery would spur new jobs. Indeed, the year progressed and the economy improved, but the fairness issue did not go away.

By summer, the administration had opened a new front. The Republicans seemed resigned to conceding women and minorities to the Democrats, but they could not give up on men. Taking advantage of longstanding race, gender and class anxieties, the Administration had given fairness a face and it was not the one that white working- and middle-class men saw in their mirrors. By identifying poverty with single African American mothers, Reagan and his team had transformed the fairness issue from a concern affecting all but the very wealthy to a problem among the undeserving African American poor. Democrats, liberals and minorities might care about poor, black, female-headed households, but working- and middle-class whites – galvanized when policies were unfair to them – would not risk their own financial security for a welfare queen. By the end of the year, with the recovery in full swing, the Republicans' divide-and-conquer strategy seemed to be working issues of fairness and hunger did not disappear after New Year, but they did recede from the headlines. When the Presidential Commission on Food Assistance, popularly referred to as the Commission on Hunger, released its final draft report on January 8, its findings echoed Edwin Meese's infamous remarks from the previous month. The report stated, "allegations of rampant hunger simply cannot be documented" (Pear 1984, 1a). Although the authors of the report did concede, "hunger does persist" (Pear 1984, 1a).

The carefully worded document generated the expected gamut of reactions. Republicans rooted, Democrats railed and pundits reiterated many of the arguments that Meese had made a month earlier. Yet the fervid coverage that followed Meese's remarks was absent. Rather, the story simmered throughout the year, briefly coming to a boil when actual news occurred or when reporters found reasons to stir the pot. The *Chicago Tribune*, perhaps mindful of its location in the still-struggling Rust Belt, ran an ongoing series on "Hunger in America" (Mahany 1984a, 1, Mahany 1984b, 1, Mahany 1984c, D12, Mahany 1984d, 1, Mahany 1984e, 1). Periodic stories reminded readers that hunger had not only persisted but also increased. According to the *Tribune*, many white, working-class men, whose factory jobs had ended in the recession's early days, were still unemployed and needed food assistance for their families (Drew 1984). Other newspapers kept the story local, focusing on the new poor, whose plight was unseen by neighbors who missed their surreptitious trips to food pantries. Then, in August, the Democratic-controlled House made "an election-year bow to the 'fairness issue'" (Shapiro 1984) by voting to increase food stamp benefits. The Republican-controlled Senate later killed the bill.

However, the big story was neither the prevalence of hunger nor the administration's denial of its existence. Rather it was, or should have been, the lack of public concern either way. When the year began, some pundits speculated that Democrats would make hunger the leading edge of the fairness issue. But the campaign never jelled. As the Republicans had hoped, Reagan coasted on the success of the economic recovery. Democrats raised myriad issues, including fairness and the escalating budget deficits, but none made a dent in the president's popularity. In late September, William Raspberry, one of the country's few African American columnists, wrote,

Forget war and peace, forget fairness, forget the federal deficit. None of it matters for this election. The only thing that matters is whether individual voters think their personal finances are more likely to improve under a Mondale administration or a second Reagan term.

(Raspberry 1984, 8d)

Raspberry predicted the rise of “pocketbook selfishness” (Raspberry 1984, 8d) after seeing a *Washington Post*-ABC poll that revealed voters would put their own interests above those of the nation. A majority of respondents said that even though Democratic candidate Walter Mondale was more likely than Reagan to “reduce the threat of nuclear war” (Raspberry 1984, 8d) and “be fairer to all segments of the population” (Raspberry 1984, 8d), and that they shared Mondale’s political views and felt the “national economy was getting worse under Reagan” (Raspberry 1984, 8d), they still backed the incumbent. They explained that Reagan would insure they were “better off financially” (Raspberry 1984, 8d). Raspberry surmised, “Reagan has made greed an acceptable attitude” (Raspberry 1984, 8d).

A *Washington Post* feature story put Midwestern names and faces on the trend. Several suburban housewives, including Sue Daniels of Mequon, Wisconsin, explained why they were voting for the incumbent this year.

I’m going for Reagan because now I’m one of the haves and he’s gonna take a little less from me and give a little less to some of the people who don’t have. Mondale’s going to give my money to everybody, whether they’re down and out because they’re lazy or because they’re not.

(Coleman and Broder 1984, 1a)

Although voters knew Mondale’s policies were more fair than Reagan’s, most didn’t care. Those who did were public service workers whose income and benefits were affected by federal cutbacks and African Americans. According to the *Post*’s reporters, “the strongest feelings on the fairness issue are heard in the black community on (Milwaukee’s) Northside” (Coleman and Broder 1984, 1a). Statistics underscored the point: Test scores were low, lines at soup kitchen were long and welfare rolls were swelling. Meanwhile, members of traditionally liberal white communities were questioning their responsibility to help. A Democratic state legislator from a wealthy, liberal community explained, “I’m beginning to wonder myself about government programs that suppress people’s will to do better” (Coleman and Broder 1984, 1a).

Not long after the 1984 election, columnist Ellen Goodman penned a chilling postmortem. Redefining the playing field in an “era of limits” (Goodman 1984, 19a). Republicans gave new meaning to the terms “winners” and “losers” (Goodman 1984, 19a) by justifying the former’s success at the latter’s expense.

If we are going to limit opportunities for those stuck in the Other America, it is much easier to think of these people as failures. If we are going to chip away at social programs for the have-nots, it is easier to name them losers.

(Goodman 1984, 19a)

Neither Goodman nor Raspberry probed the press’ role in this shift. By virtue of whom it covered and how it reported, the news media enabled Reagan’s ideas and policies to be mainstreamed. That Reaganomics materially benefited a large swath of the public enhanced its appeal. Tracing the sweep of fairness coverage over 1983 shows that in reporting the debate, journalists repeatedly framed the story according to the administration’s point of view. Counterarguments usually were cited for their bite and pithiness rather than their deep contextualization of issues or reasoned analysis of ideas. The repetition of tropes about indolent blacks, welfare cheats and female-headed households – eased the slide of public opinion into *us* versus *them*. Most significantly, Reagan’s arguments about welfare’s deleterious impact on

families gave credence to a moral judgment about the undeserving poor, a judgment that justified his economic policies. Skillfully triangulating religious rationalization, political policy and the news media, Reagan's ability to coopt the fairness issue provides a good case study of the relationship between power and journalism.

Further readings

- Bowe, B. J., Fahmy, S. and Wanta, W., 2013. Missing Religion: Second Level Agenda Setting and Islam in American Newspapers. *International Communication Gazette*, 75(7), 636–652.
This study is one of the few to look at religion as a factor in agenda setting.
- Bullock, H., Wyche, K. F. and Williams, W., 2001. Media Images of the Poor. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(2), 229–246.
An excellent article on how media contributes to the marginalization of the poor, especially people of color and welfare recipients.
- Dochuk, D., 2011. *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*. New York: W.W. Norton.
Dochuk's book is a deeply researched exploration of how and why Southern California became a hub for conservative religion and politics.
- Steensland, B., 2011. *The Failed Welfare Revolution: America's Struggle Over Guaranteed Income Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
A thoughtful and accessible exploration of a failed attempt to end poverty.

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