

emerges from conference later this fall may be worse than the Senate version.

Democrats have retreated this far on welfare because of a widespread perception that the welfare system breeds dependency. This popular consensus stems partly from a concerted conservative ideological campaign and partly from changing attitudes toward women and work. But for many Americans, welfare really means black single mothers, a racist sentiment the Republicans have used to build popular frenzy against government. President Clinton, whose close friend Marian Wright Edelman calls the bill "tragic," will probably sign it in order to look like an effective leader who kept his promise to "end welfare as we know it."

This is not to say the welfare system didn't need improvement. Progressive welfare reform could have made it easier for single mothers to work by providing free health care and low-cost child care as well as job training and education. But this punitive overhaul sends them off on their own to secure work in a world of downsizing, layoffs and capital flight. Where are welfare recipients going to find stable jobs? How can they pay for health insurance and child care when they earn the minimum wage? What will happen to their children? Children freezing to death on grates, as envisioned by Senator Moynihan, may soon become a news staple.

For progressives the front now shifts to the states, to skirmishes over the conditions they will impose and attempts to alleviate suffering. But we should not let compassion distract us from the wider battles—to keep alive an ethic of social responsibility and to counter the racism that fed this cynical reform. What will it take to convince our fellow citizens that poor black mothers are not the cause of their pain?

## Powell's Race

Several weeks ago John McLaughlin, on his supremely silly political talk show, concluded a segment on Colin Powell's presidential prospects by bellowing that Powell "transcended race." I gather that this meant Powell could earn a special white folks' dispensation to be considered a "real" presidential candidate, as opposed to, for example, the black Jesse Jackson.

Since neither American culture nor American politics has managed to transcend race, the McLaughlin comment, like much purveyed on that program, is nonsense. The question about Powell is not about transcendence but about how he will affect the texture of our race-charged politics.

There is one assumption that underlies any serious discussion of a Powell candidacy: that he will enter the campaign with a passion to achieve major change in America. The economic problems plaguing those on the lower half of the wage scale would be sufficient to infuse such a campaign with presidential grandeur. Powell told an interviewer recently that he does not see signs of economic distress at the assemblages where he makes his high-fee lectures or the shopping malls near the upscale northern Virginia neighborhood where he lives. He's been looking in the wrong places. If he can bring

himself to see past the anecdotes of his own recent life, virtually every economic study done on this subject in recent years (not to mention the inexorable stream of stories about corporate layoffs) will reveal the reasons underlying the deep anxiety of the lower white-collar classes and the upper blue-collar ones. They will also reveal the disaster that has befallen unskilled workers generally and the unmitigated calamity that grips unskilled black workers.

This is not a conservative or a liberal issue. When the well-being of at least half the American work force is at stake, we face a crisis that is more daunting and more central to the nation's future than, say, ending the Korean War. But our political system hasn't faced up squarely to the issues brought on by globalization and technology, because the portion of the electorate that pays for politics likes the economy the way it is and thus buys selfish and shortsighted political programs. It will take a candidate of massive stature, a reputation for integrity and relative independence—such as Powell could bring—to fashion approaches commensurate with the severity of our problems.

Powell's presence in the White House would sweep away the ugliest impediment to facing those problems honestly: racial scapegoating. After the civil rights advances and the urban rebellions of the sixties, race seeped into our politics in a particularly poisonous way. Nixon and Wallace played the race card in the national arena and Reagan and Bush turned it into a huge trump. By crowing about "the end of welfare as we know it," battering Jesse Jackson with Sister Souljah and lecturing blacks (with the ears of whites in mind) about our need for personal responsibility—without addressing the black economic crisis—Bill Clinton turned the race card into a bipartisan weapon in 1992.

With about 85 percent of the black presidential vote crammed into a corner of the Democratic Party, Republicans run on their whiteness and Democrats run away from "their" blacks. That mixture is toxic. It prevents rational discourse on the broadest range of issues, from our national priorities to education reform to urban reconstruction. Affirmative action, welfare as we know it and street crime have become the black proxies through which the practitioners of the politics of savagery have exploited white economic anxieties, undone efforts to craft humane government programs and scratched away at deep concerns about the coarsening of American life and culture.

Powell's presence in the race either as a Republican or an independent would shake enough black votes out of the Democratic Party to force each major party to give up its scapegoating in order to compete seriously for the allegiance of blacks. And Powell himself, clear about his identity as a black man and broadly respected by whites, would be able to start us on a badly needed rational and lower-decibel discussion designed to heal our ancient racial wounds. What we should all hope for is that he will decide to use his formidable assets—including his race—to help us face some of our most intractable problems. Nobody in his right mind would want Colin Powell to transcend race.

ROGER WILKINS

*Roger Wilkins is a member of The Nation's editorial board.*