

Welfare Could Be First Big Test for Republicans

By Michael Rust

When Congress convenes, the Republicans will make welfare reform a priority. Expect Democrats to oppose the Personal Responsibility Act by citing what they see as its deleterious effect on children.

Buried in the electoral rubble, some liberal opponents of resurgent Republicanism are focusing on the GOP's agenda for welfare reform.

"We think it always makes sense to take the needs of children in account in making public policy," says Deborah Weinstein, director of Family Income Support at the Children's Defense Fund, the advocacy group that once Hillary Rodham Clinton as its chairwoman. "We believe that when members of Congress learn the details of this plan, they will shrink from it."

This may seem like bold talk in light of the Republican landslide. But welfare reform is shaping up to be one of the first battles in the new era on Capitol Hill. Budget deficits make spending cuts a bipartisan issue, and public distrust of Congress will head off any opposition to congressional reform. But when it comes to welfare, polls show that the idea of a social safety net still carries some weight with voters — particularly women. And, some say, there's a lingering dichotomy in American politics.

"It's an interesting phenomenon in our country," says David Liederman, executive director of the Child Welfare League. "On the one hand, people are not happy with people on public assistance. On the other hand, people want to do more for children. Okay, how do you juxtapose those two things?"

While the 104th Congress won't wrestle with this question until January, the Republican "Contract With America" — upon which most GOP House candidates campaigned — has raised the anxiety levels of welfare defenders. At a post-election press conference, Rep. Bill Archer, the Texas Republican who will head the tax-writing House Ways and Means Com-

mittee, said the GOP's new welfare-reform bill, called the Personal Responsibility Act, would be introduced in the first 100 days and directed to the Ways and Means subcommittee on human resources.

Like the other nine proposals in the Contract With America (see sidebar,

impose a "family cap" limiting the amount of AFDC money a mother would receive regardless of how many dependents she has.

In keeping with Republican criticism of big government, the Personal Responsibility Act would put growth caps on AFDC, as well as on Supplemental Security Income and public housing programs. Republicans would combine 10 major nutrition programs into a single block-grant program. And they would grant states nearly \$10 billion during the next five years to design and run work-related programs. Federal rules would set minimal work requirements and also order states to end welfare to a family after five years. Noncitizens (except those who are sick, elderly or longtime residents) would be excluded from welfare programs.

The opening salvo in the forthcoming battle came from a curious source. At a meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops convening shortly after the election, prelates and conference officials criticized Republican calls for sharp cuts in welfare and



Keeping a pledge: Republicans will try to legislate their "Contract With America."

page 12), the welfare-reform bill can be amended in subcommittee, in the full committee and on the floor of the House. In its current state, however, GOP welfare reform is an explosive challenge to the status quo. Under the bill, unwed mothers age 17 and younger no longer would be eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC, although the federal government would provide states with block grants for those mothers and children. In addition, the bill would

other social spending. They singled out a remark by incoming House Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia, who said Congress ought to consider cutting benefits after 60 days and turning more care of the poor over to charities and orphanages.

The bishops' Domestic Policy Committee specifically rejected what it called "bumper-sticker solutions" to welfare reform, such as "two years and you're off" or "one more child and your benefits are cut." John Carr,

The Contract With America

Although touted by Republican leaders as one of the keys to November's landslide victory, many Americans are unaware of what the GOP's Contract With America actually says. Here is a brief summary of the main points.

On the day the 104th Congress convenes, the new Republican majority has pledged to immediately pass eight reforms related to the way the House does business, including a measure that would apply all existing laws to Congress; cut the number of committees and subcommittees; cut committee staff by one-third; ban proxy (or ghost) voting in committee; mandate term limits for committee leaders; implement an "honest" zero-baseline budget; and begin a comprehensive audit of House books.

The Republicans who signed the contract also have pledged to bring the following 10 major bills to the House floor for a vote within the first 100 days of the new session:

- The Fiscal Responsibility Act, a combination of the balanced-budget amendment and a legislative line-item veto.
- The Taking Back Our Streets Act, an anticrime package that changes rules regarding evidence, suggests more effective death-penalty provisions, mandates victim restitution and adds additional money for law enforcement.
- The Personal Responsibility Act, a major overhaul of existing welfare programs.
- The Family Reinforcement Act, which calls for tougher enforcement of child-support laws, tax incentives for adoption, stronger laws against child pornography and a tax credit for elderly dependent care.
- The American Dream Restoration Act, a revision of the tax code that features a \$500-per-child tax credit, a repeal of the tax penalty on married couples and new incentives for saving money.
- The National Security Re-

storation Act, which would increase "essential" defense spending and prohibit U.S. troops from being used under the command of the United Nations.

- The Senior Citizens Fairness Act, a Social Security reform bill



that would repeal the 1993 tax hikes on benefits, increase the earnings limit that forces seniors out of the workforce and provide new tax incentives for private long-term care insurance.

- The Job Creation and Wage Enhancement Act, which would provide incentives to small businesses, including a capital-gains tax cut, and eliminate unfunded mandates that pass the cost of federal regulation to state and local governments.

• The Common Sense Legal Reforms Act, a measure aimed at stemming the tide of litigation, would enact "loser pays" laws to prevent frivolous lawsuits, set limits on awards for punitive damages and reform product-liability laws.

- The Citizen Legislature Act, which calls for term limits to discourage career politicians.

By Brian Robertson

secretary of the bishops' Social Development and World Peace Office, told reporters that Catholic bishops will testify before Congress on protecting poor children and families from "inflexible rules" governing welfare reform.

But Richard John Neuhaus, editor-in-chief of the neoconservative journal *First Things* and a Catholic priest, believes that the bishops' statements miss "the distinctively Catholic emphasis on subsidiarity, [which] mandates that responsibility for public policy should be located as closely as possible to the people immediately affected." Russell Hittinger, a professor of philosophy at Catholic University, agrees. Subsidiarity "has been a mainstay of papal social teaching for 60 years," he says. Unfortunately, the existence of a bureaucracy in the bishops' organization is "contrary to the very principle," he adds.

Neuhaus says he hopes the bishops "will develop a more positive approach to the very real possibilities for mediating institutions — and especially churches — in meeting the needs of the poor. I think that they might be surprised to find a great responsiveness on the part of the Republican leadership."

Archer, as the new Ways and Means chairman, now is part of that leadership. At a recent press conference, he said that welfare reform should reduce dependency as well as "the overall expenditures of money of working Americans to nonworking Americans." However, in keeping with the spirit of the times, opponents of the GOP plan are accusing the Republicans of fiscal irresponsibility.

Republican talk about setting up orphanages is "wildly unrealistic," says Liederman. Since it now costs \$36,000 a year to put a child in a group facility, "it's hard to see what their short-term savings are," agrees Weinstein, who claims the long-term result will cost taxpayers billions. Following the election, the Children's Defense Fund released a study, "Wasting America's Future," that says children in poverty cost the economy at least \$36 billion in lost worker productivity every year. "That's money that would come to all of us in the form of national prosperity," says Weinstein.

However, conservative advocates of welfare reform argue that economics is not the principle concern. "Money is not the critical issue here," says Neuhaus, "and shouldn't be the critical issue. The critical issue is how to help people out of the prison of dependency."