

The Politics of Empowerment

Book Review by Kevin Lamb

*To some extent, when you've seen one city slum,
you've seen them all.*
— Spiro Agnew

Earlier this summer President Clinton unveiled the latest federal policy for reversing the prolonged conditions of poverty among America's underclass. While touring several poverty-stricken areas across the United States from Appalachia and urban slums to an Indian reservation Clinton spent the first week of July promoting a new business-government venture for economically depressed communities. As a federal anti-poverty scheme, this "New Market Initiative" exemplifies the idea that the "government's role is to create the conditions for success, give people the tools they need to succeed, and then, in effect, *empower* people to make the most of it."

The rationale for this new federal initiative is that corporations overlook a potential reservoir of untapped skilled labor in these impoverished areas. Fueling this latest endeavor is the idea of community *empowerment*. Embraced by egalitarians on both sides of the political spectrum, "empowerment zones" are intended to get people on the train of autonomy by greasing the tracks of opportunity; "resources" from both the federal government and private sector serve as a catalytic lubricant. Give people the incentive to take responsibility for their own well-being by providing more capital (block grants and bank loans), and impoverished communities will prosper.

As Tamar Jacoby and Fred Siegel recently point out in *The New Republic*, the goal of this public and private

John Doe is...

sector partnership, is to eventually spawn "a commercial infrastructure and incubate a local business culture" from this enterprise.¹ Hence, the right combination of financial incentives provides an opportunity to overcome previous hardships from personal irresponsibility to community neglect. Once people become "empowered" by taking more responsibility for their own affairs, then stagnant communities will become economically and socially vibrant. Is this expectation an unrealistic panacea or a successfully proven remedy for overcoming poverty?.

Can individuals "empower" themselves with financial incentives to conquer pathological factors or is the concept of "empowerment" a political cliché?

In *The Politics of Empowerment*, Robert Weissberg, Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, examines the modern notion of empowerment and whether or not government-sponsored efforts to

make people more self-reliable work as intended. The author conducts a FDA-like inspection of empowerment, distinguishing between the meaning of "empowerment" and the reality of governmental reforms that attempt to "empower" the impoverished by nurturing self-reliance. Weissberg dares to ask: Is this a suitable remedy for every community wherein social pathologies dominate? For areas that encounter persistently higher rates of pathological behavior--violent crime, infant mortality, AIDS, drug-addiction, homelessness, teen pregnancies, and out-of-wedlock births is "empowerment" a prescription for self-improvement or a recipe for further self-destruction?

Most significantly, Weissberg discovers that in contemporary parlance the term "empowerment" is virtually meaningless. As he persuasively argues, it "masks a bewildering collection of conflicting ideas, plans and goals" which, if anything, symbolizes further dependency on government programs rather than self-determination. Hence, self-reliance in a technologically

The Politics of Empowerment

by Robert Weissberg
Westport, CT: Praeger
272 pages, price ???



advanced society requires a given level of competence. Weissberg skillfully argues that advocates of empowerment fail to address the following paradox,

Those who need uplifting the most are, in all likelihood, the identical people possessing the least requisite capacity. If our impoverished public housing resident could unravel his or her troubled situation and act accordingly, he or she would have long since departed. It is ignorance, often coupled with an incapacity to use knowledge when adroitly provided, that accounts for difficulties in the first place. That those most in need may be incapable of utilizing expert advice is an awkward, all too often disregarded, fact. Moreover, to provide constant intrusive direction encourages dependency, not autonomy.

This close scrutiny reveals the single greatest obstacle that confronts empowerment schemes — channeling irresponsible behavior and slothful patterns of conduct into a conscientiously productive demeanor. Most federal programs, from LBJ's "Great Society" to Clinton's welfare-to-work reforms, have simply failed to properly understand the human condition. The reason why the indigent suffer from the long-term effects of abject poverty isn't because of societal neglect (the wealthy benefitting at the expense of the poor) or bureaucratic inefficiency (maladapted government programs), but the unfortunate consequences of their own conduct.

Inculcating a work ethic requires more than financial capital as an incentive for self-enrichment, it demands what conservative economist Thomas Sowell identifies as "human capital" — personal traits and characteristics that are conducive to wealth accumulation and social well-being. The person more apt to be dependent upon charity or public welfare lacks what "empowerment" advocates cannot easily supplant responsibility and perseverance. *Ability* and *aspiration* are human characteristics essential for adapting to challenges under adverse conditions. Self-reliance demands *consistent behavioral stability*. Hence, by neglecting the underlying traits that distinguish autonomy from dependency, empowerment programs are fundamentally deficient.

Moreover, communities are by definition more than a tract of land or an urban zoning section. Government

subsidies alone cannot replace the *intangible* human qualities that make for a desirable community. Corporations remain skeptical of federal subsidies and tax incentives that compensate for volatile investments in unsafe inner-city areas, especially when nearby residential dwellings are deemed uninhabitable by customers as well as prospective employees, dust how profitable is it for entrepreneurs to establish themselves in crime-ridden districts that attract little if any clientele and require elaborate security measures (high-tech equipment) in order to minimize thievery and embezzlement?

Another problem with empowerment is that it is all too often oversold. In the minds of some, wealth and prosperity will naturally follow the transition from dependency to self-sufficiency with little or no effort. Like hitting all the right tumblers on a combination lock, once individuals achieve "empowerment" wealth and status will fall right into place. It is the equivalent of expecting something for nothing or staking your future on the Powerball lottery. Notions of effort or ingenuity, not to mention good fortune, are missing elements that require the continuation of empowerment programs.

It goes without saying that placing more personal responsibility on the indigent may foster the original set of conditions that called for public assistance. Leaving some to rely upon their own merits for earning a stable living is like extending a line of credit to a spendthrift. Likewise, expecting a beggar to invest his daily income from panhandling, rather than feed a drug or alcohol addiction, is simply unrealistic. Empowerment requires self-initiative; being able to forfeit present desires for a deferred future good *given the circumstances of one's present situation*. Like pouring kerosene on an open fire, the impact of some anti-poverty programs is often counter-productive.

Perhaps the single greatest obstacle to empowerment remains unreasonable expectations. Here, Weissberg raises what heretofore has been neglected with regard to empowerment — the relationship between ineptitude and dependency. Profitable enterprises depend upon the efficient use of labor. Skill-level retieets ability; the single greatest challenge faeing the private sector is utilizing successfully the available pool of labor-market talent. As Walter Van Dyke Bingham once put it,

A person's aptitude for a skilled trade is in part a matter of his interests and preferences; in

*part, of his facility in acquiring manual expertness in the kinds of skills required; and in part also, of his abilities in acquiring knowledge and exercising good sense in the decisions he makes.*²

Skeptics are likely to find Weissberg's assessment of empowerment unduly pessimistic. Yet, in evaluating the effectiveness of the Empowerment Act of 1993, Weissberg discusses evenhandedly the pros and cons of local programs, cautiously noting that a preliminary review gives such efforts overall low marks. Literally, billions of dollars in annual federal expenditures have been allocated for local empowerment programs over the years, even though few ask what has been gained as a result or why additional expenditures are needed for new federal efforts.

Accordingly, Weissberg reviews the record of empowerment programs for the Atlanta and Detroit area. In the case of the former, only 4 of 34 goals have been achieved to date despite ample revenue. Unlike the Atlanta program, which is hampered by bureaucratic red tape and administrative waste, the Detroit model has been successful because of the nature of the regional labor market. The presence of the big three auto makers, as well as subsidiary contracting firms, and the lure of corporate tax incentives, create favorable conditions for empowerment. However, most empowerment projects fall somewhere in between the Atlanta and Detroit experience, resembling the former more often than the later.

The superficial semantics of Clinton's "New Market Initiative" conveys the photo-op of a political exercise instead of a serious policy endeavor. Case in point: several corporate executives accompanied Clinton on his voyage to destitute localities, including Stephen Burd, chief executive officer of the Safeway supermarket chain. During a round-table discussion in Arizona, Burd promoted Safeway's "profitable" practice of investing in high-risk urban areas. Burd noted that extra security measures, like police substations, allow Safeway to expand into the inner-cities. Yet Burd neglected to point out that less than a year ago, Safeway closed "the last remaining full-service supermarket in Ward 8," a high-crime section of Washington, DC. Safeway's inconsistency in the decision to close the store, which operated at an annual loss of \$500,000, merely reinforces Professor Weissberg's insightful apprehension over the

disingenuous nature of empowerment politics. **TSC**

NOTES

¹ Jacoby, Tamar & Fred Siegel "Growing the Inner City?." *The New Republic* 8/23/99, pp. 22-27.

² Bingham, Walter Van Dyke *Aptitudes & Aptitude Testing*, Harper & Brothers 1927, p. 128.