

States of the Union

SEGREGATING THE POOR

BY RICHARD J MARGOLIS

*The toad beneath the harrow knows
exactly where each sharp tooth
goes,
the butterfly upon the road
preaches contentment to the toad*
—RUDYARD KIPLING

THEY HAVE closed down the state welfare office in Norwalk, Connecticut, the town next-door to mine, in what seems an officially sponsored drive to hound poor people out of the parts of Fairfield county God created exclusively for the rich. From now on Norwalk's 2,200 welfare recipients will have to travel 25 miles to Bridgeport in order to collect food stamps, consult caseworkers or simply fill out forms. Few of the families involved own usable automobiles, bus fare to Bridgeport is \$3.10 round-trip, and welfare will not pay for it—the state cancelled “transportation allowances” last year.

The response to this latest governmental act of cruelty was interesting. Liberal and moderate organizations such as the League of Women Voters protested, conservative groups

like the Taxpayers' League applauded (“The people of Connecticut have demanded these welfare reforms,” its chairman noted), and the minions of the New Left were silent.

They were silent because the state's policy of economic segregation parallels their own segregationist beliefs. For example, in a recent essay on slavery in the *New York Review*, the New Left's modish mouthpiece, historian Eugene D. Genovese attempts to prove that black-white antagonisms in the antebellum South “laid the foundations for the emergence of two peoples whose national differences are as great as their similarities.” The resultant schism, he concludes, “is not likely to be overcome by the latest ‘integrationist’ con games of American liberalism.” With one gratuitous swipe at liberalism Genovese thus writes off an old and honorable dream. Worse, he implies that today's segregation is solely a consequence of yesterday's conflicts—a disingenuous notion which conveniently ignores present-day social policy.

That chairman of the Norwalk Taxpayers' League was closer to the truth. We are getting more and more segregation, not because we inherited it, but because we demand it. Segregation does not come naturally, it has to be worked at. And Connecticut is working at it, albeit on a financial rather than an overtly racial basis.

In the state's long range campaign to isolate poor people, the city of Bridgeport has apparently been designated a prime dumping ground. During the past decade 10,000 white residents have fled that benighted community—the poorest in Fairfield county—and 10,000 blacks have taken their place. Many of them came from Norwalk, having been thoughtfully uprooted by new highways and urban renewal projects. The road to segregation was ploughed by state-powered bulldozers and financed by Federal subsidies.

The welfare business in Bridgeport is thriving, in part because 17 per cent of the blacks who live there have incomes below the poverty line compared with only 5 per cent of the whites. Meanwhile, the rest of

the county waxes wealthy Between 1960 and 1970 Fairfield's median income shot up 77 per cent, to \$13 000, in predominantly white exurbs like Darien and New Canaan, average family incomes have risen to more than \$31,000 (In Bridgeport, family incomes average \$10,000)

The welfare shutdown in Norwalk was a logical step in the state's march toward economic segregation. It was engineered by appointees of Republican Governor Thomas J Meskill, who won office two years ago by promising to bring fiscal prudence to Connecticut. His notion of prudence, it develops, is to transform antipoverty campaigns into antipoor-people campaigns. Meskill has slashed away at community action programs and tightened the welfare spigot to a trickle, all the while invoking the virtue of thrift and disclaiming any animus toward the poor. Two months ago, in an effort to cut spending, his welfare department instituted the "flat grant" system, a device whereby welfare clients receive a set amount of money each month, regardless of their needs and expenses.

Flat grants have eliminated rental allowances, thus making it all but impossible for a welfare family to live in most parts of Fairfield county, where the rents are high. Naturally, the result has been a rash of evictions. "One of our clients was cut \$147 when the flat grant went through," explained a Norwalk Legal Services attorney. "This month she's being evicted from her apartment, and there's nothing we can do about it." A family of four on welfare receives a monthly flat grant of \$310, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$220, not including utilities.

In addition to choking off welfare funds, Meskill has sharply increased the sales tax on such necessary items as milk, shoes and fuel. So poor people are now bilked coming and going—and Connecticut has begun to bear an uncanny resemblance to

states in the Deep South. Like Alabama, it taxes its poor and rewards its rich, like Mississippi, it uses welfare against the indigent, as a tool in a statewide eviction program. And like many states throughout the nation, where it cannot physically segregate the poor, it does so by moral means.

The last lumps the poor with criminals, cutting them off from the American conscience by shifting the focus to law and order. On the day Norwalk's welfare office closed, Meskill was at a conference of New England police chiefs in New Hampshire, promising to lead the fight in his state "for restoration of the death penalty." For good measure, he recommended more wiretapping. "The solid silent majority," he said, "knows that there is really only one line of defense against the anarchy and chaos which threaten us, and that line of defense is made of law enforcement officers."

MESKILL DID NOT invent the idea of isolating the poor—New York's recent move to force every welfare client to carry an identification card, complete with mug shot, is a dandy segregating device—but his administration has been unusually eager to defame people on relief. Last year, for instance, Welfare Commissioner Henry White announced that a large percentage of welfare clients were employable. He forgot to mention that (1) Connecticut has the second highest unemployment rate in the nation, and (2) that most of those getting welfare are old, disabled or too young to work.

We like to think of ourselves as a nation of "good guys," and if we elect Neanderthals who pursue regressive social policies, we ask them to find reasons for their programs and to take us off the hook. That is why Meskill's bureaucrats in Hartford keep saying that welfare accounts for one-third of the state budget, when the actual figure is 17 per cent, that people are cheating the

welfare office—taking poverty—when in fact less than 2 per cent have been certified as frauds, and that prospective recipients flock to Connecticut because of the high benefits, when the truth is that all the surrounding states (New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island) offer higher payments. Under the circumstances, it is little wonder that the public gets "welfare" mixed up with "anarchy and chaos," a confusion that keeps Meskill's unacknowledged vendetta moving right along.

In Wilton, where I live, the local police force has doubled to 29 officers since 1967, and its storeroom is stacked high with the latest anti-riot equipment. Not that the crime rate has gone up appreciably, or that we've ever had a hint of riot. But we are for law and order, and Norwalk's 2,200 welfare frauds—the people who would rather steal than work—are lurking just over the border.

Wilton, with its two-acre zoning regulations and its \$80,000 ranch-houses, has already achieved for itself what the state is hoping to do for Norwalk, that is, it has driven out nearly all of its eligible welfare residents. True, we carry on a small, discreet program that gives temporary help to persons down on their luck, usually victims of disease or divorce. "We did have one out-of-work executive come in and apply for help," says the town's family service worker. "He had a \$500 monthly mortgage payment to meet and a lot of other debts, including a \$40 bill from the Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club. This man was horrified at how little we had to offer."

As a rule, Wilton's few welfare clients either find a job or get out of town. They go to places like Norwalk. But now Norwalk is being Wiltonized, the state, with its flat grants and lockouts, has made it unfit for habitation by any but the affluent. So much for the "integrationist con games of liberalism." So much for the dream.