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# Reconsidering the Local Politics of Welfare: The Example of the Newburgh Controversy (1961-1962)

TAMARA BOUSSAC

## **Keywords**

welfare; work; conservatism; New York; Newburgh; John F. Kennedy

*Cet article s'intéresse à une controverse locale autour de l'assistance et à ses effets sur les réformes fédérales au début des années 1960. En 1961, la petite ville de Newburgh, dans l'État de New York, adopta une réforme drastique afin de restreindre l'éligibilité aux programmes d'assistance. Alors qu'une controverse nationale se développait autour du coût des politiques sociales, du travail en contrepartie des aides et de la fraude, les élus de l'État de New York et de l'État fédéral furent contraints de prendre position sur une réforme du système d'assistance. Les collectivités locales et les citoyens ordinaires sont rarement placés au centre de l'élaboration des politiques sociales aux États-Unis. Cet article suggère cependant que, loin d'être de simples détails de l'histoire de l'État-providence américain, les mobilisations locales devraient être davantage intégrées dans cette histoire. Au cours de la deuxième moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, celles-ci eurent en effet un effet transformateur en incitant les élus fédéraux à réévaluer les programmes d'assistance qui avaient été créés pendant le New Deal.*

On January 28, 1962, as Americans turned on their televisions to watch NBC's prime time documentary, *The Battle of Newburgh*, they heard Joseph Mitchell, the city manager of Newburgh, New York, rant against federal welfare programs. "We challenge the right of a welfare program to contribute to the rise of the slums, to the rise of illegitimacy, to the rise of social diseases among children and adults", Mitchell asserted, "We challenge the right of moral chiselers on welfare to squat on the

relief rolls forever. We challenge the right of freeloaders to make more on relief than when working.”<sup>1</sup> Even though Newburgh was a small city in the Hudson Valley, Joseph Mitchell was known to many Americans. Those who watched NBC’s *Battle of Newburgh* documentary that night were reminded of a controversy that had stormed throughout the country a few months earlier. In the spring of 1961, Newburgh, located seventy miles north of New York City, had passed a reform to limit welfare eligibility and payments. By the end of the summer, Newburgh’s reform had sparked a national debate over welfare, work, fraud and illegitimacy. “Newburgh wasn’t always like this”, sighed a young woman on welfare interviewed by NBC. “It deteriorated over the years and nobody seemed to notice. There was poverty, there was slums—which most cities have I imagine—but the people in Newburgh didn’t seem to notice it when it happened. And then Mr. Mitchell came along and Newburgh was just ripe for something like him. Ready and waiting.”

For Joseph Mitchell as for many local officials and citizens across the country, federal welfare programs had indeed become an object of growing resentment since the postwar years. Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), in particular, which provided assistance to single mothers who cared for their children, became the target of scathing attacks as the number of recipients increased dramatically. Between 1945 and 1950, the number of families receiving ADC more than doubled from 274,000 to 671,00 (Mittelstadt 194). By 1960, over 3 million people received ADC. The demographic makeup of the program’s clientele changed as well. A greater percentage of ADC mothers in the 1950s and early 1960s were divorced, deserted or had never been married, fueling critiques that the program encouraged family breakup and illegitimacy. Because African Americans were more likely to be poor and less likely to have access to steady employment and social insurance programs, ADC rolls also became increasingly black. Black families made up 14% of ADC rolls in 1938 and 30% in 1948 (Nadasen *et al.* 20).

As negative reports of welfare fraud, waste and growing costs flourished in the press throughout the 1950s (Gilens 115), northern states and cities set out to reduce welfare expenditures and restrict eligibility. States and localities restricted ADC by simply cutting funding and reacted to perceptions of fraud with behavioral requirements (Tani 202). For example, they implemented “suitable home” rules that enabled social workers to pay nightly visits to recipients to make sure women did not live with their boyfriends while receiving aid (Sugrue 384). Before welfare

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1. National Broadcasting Company. *The Battle of Newburgh*, January 28, 1962. <https://archive.org/details/TheBattleOfNewburgh1963>

came under attack at the national level in the late 1960s, a first backlash against Aid to Dependent Children had thus developed at the local and state levels in the 1950s (Reese 20).

Most accounts of the American welfare state tend to be national in scope. By focusing on elected officials and administrators in the federal government, they often offer a top-down narrative of the making of social policy in the United States (see Patterson; Mittelstadt; Katznelson; Zelizer). However, even after the Social Security Act of 1935 was passed, state and local governments retained large discretion over the implementation of welfare programs, which were funded by the federal government and the states, and administered by localities (Tani 14). The purpose of this article is to reconsider how the local politics of welfare influenced the shaping of social policy in the postwar era. In the early 1960s, local assaults against welfare pushed federal legislators to change social policy and notably authorize work requirements long before the workfare policies of the 1980s and 1990s. Based on the example of the Newburgh controversy and its impact on federal reform between 1961 and 1962, I argue that the perspective of local governments and citizens at the grassroots level should be taken into greater account in assessments of the American welfare state. Far from being simple details in the history of welfare, local and grassroots mobilizations prompted elected officials in the federal government to reappraise the public assistance programs that had been created during the New Deal. Studying such mobilizations may therefore give scholars a better understanding of how the welfare state was redefined in face of the “conservative ascendancy” in American society and politics (Katz 17) as early as the 1950s.

### **The Local Politics of Welfare: Race, Urban Renewal and Welfare Reform in Newburgh, N.Y.**

In 1960, Newburgh counted some 30,979 inhabitants and its industrial economy and tax base had been declining sharply since the end of World War II. The city’s shipyards on the Hudson, which had built floating dry docks for the U.S. Navy, were shut down in 1947, leaving hundreds of workers unemployed.<sup>2</sup> With the development of suburban housing and malls in nearby towns and the massive in-migration of African Americans in the 1950s, stores and white residents started to leave Newburgh. The city was caught in a spiral of white flight, capital flight

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2. Newburgh Chamber of Commerce, telegram to James Forrestal, January 3 1947. Box 5. Folder Newburgh Shipyards (1946-1947). Katharine Saint George papers, Division of Rare Books and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

and disinvestment, all resulting in the loss of fiscal revenues for the municipal government. Overlooking the fact that the city had faced structural economic woes since the end of the war, city officials offered a compelling narrative that scapegoated newly-arrived African Americans, who had supposedly come to Newburgh to receive welfare, for the rise in slums as well as declining property values and business activity in the city.

Retail sales, which had remained the city's most dynamic sector, contracted in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Stores progressively left the city's commercial heart around Water Street, along the Hudson River, and relocated outside city limits. Newburgh was classified as a "labor surplus area" in 1958 and 90% of the city's waterfront stores had become vacant by the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> As municipal finances rested primarily on property taxes, capital flight meant declining fiscal revenues for the city.<sup>5</sup>

The city also underwent demographic change under the effect of the Second Great Migration. Starting in the 1940s, African Americans from North Carolina came massively to Newburgh, mostly to work as agricultural laborers in nearby fruit farms or as janitors and waiters in the city's hotels and ferries.<sup>6</sup> The black population in Newburgh nearly tripled throughout the 1950s and reached 17% of the city's population in 1960, while total city population declined by 3.6%.<sup>7</sup>

Newburgh's black population concentrated in a small section around Water Street along the Hudson River, which had formerly been the city's commercial center. Housing policy fostered residential segregation in Newburgh. The city's zoning ordinance restricted collective housing to the waterfront area while other residential neighborhoods were zoned for single-family housing.<sup>8</sup> African American migrants from the rural South who could not afford a house of their own were forced to live in apartment buildings in the waterfront section. In 1954, the introduction of a public housing project into the area also reinforced segregation patterns. At the end of the decade, its 86 apartments were all

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3. David Rosen Associates Inc. *Feasibility Survey Area: Newburgh, N.Y.*, 1964, 81, New York State Library.

4. *Ibid.*; Kathryn D. Goodwin, memo to William L., Mitchell. July 21, 1961. Box 2000-27. Folder "Public assistance, Newburgh, NY, 1961." Archives of the Social Security Administration.

5. Metcalf & Eddy, *Comprehensive Development Plan: City of Newburgh, N.Y.*, 1969, 85-87, New York State Library.

6. Robert Brennan. *Genealogical History of Black Families in Orange County, N.Y.* Volume 4, 2004, 1, New York State Library.

7. U.S. Census of Population: 1960.

8. Zoning Ordinance: City of Newburgh, N.Y., 1960, New York State Library.

occupied by Black families.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, vacant stores along the Hudson River were separated into run-down apartments that were rented to African Americans for overpriced rents.<sup>10</sup>

Migrations did more than change the city's racial makeup. They also provided municipal officials with a new explanation for the city's economic decline and urban decay. African Americans, they claimed, had come to Newburgh because of the availability of welfare and had turned the old commercial neighborhood into slums. As a response, they put forward two projects that would profoundly change the city's social landscape: urban renewal and welfare reform, which both targeted African Americans who lived in the waterfront area.

The Water Street Urban Renewal Program was started in 1958 in order to revamp the city's commercial center, build new housing units and increase property values in the area. Out of the 235 buildings that were targeted for destruction, 217 were strictly residential and primarily housed African American families. While 299 black families would be displaced by urban renewal, as opposed to only 24 white families, African American leaders remained excluded from the urban renewal planning committee.<sup>11</sup> Newburgh's NAACP chapter described situations where "real estate negotiators" used "intimidation and coercion", "creating fear, panic and near hysteria" to force black property owners to sell their homes at cheap prices.<sup>12</sup>

For George McKneally, a Republican member of the city council, the influx of African Americans into the area had caused property values to collapse. Because they had turned the city's old commercial area into slums, "the fault" was "theirs for permitting property values to go downhill".<sup>13</sup> Overlooking the fact that property values had actually gone up, not down, in the area during the 1950s<sup>14</sup>, city officials and real-estate appraisers assumed that immediate demolition of blighted residential

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9. David Rosen Associates Inc., *op. cit.*, 191.

10. *Ibid.*, 165; U.S. Census of Housing: 1960, City Blocks, Newburgh, N.Y.

11. John Gregory, "Abrams outlines city's slum plan", *The Newburgh Evening News*, February 10, 1959; Jack Wood, memo to Sinclair Bourne, January 3, 1963, NAACP administration 1956-1965. General Office Files, folder "Staff: Wood, Jack. Memoranda, 1963", NAACP papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NAACP papers).

12. Ellsworth Potter, letter to Roy Wilkins, August 22, 1961. General Office Files, folder "Government cities Newburgh, N.Y., 1960-1962", NAACP papers.

13. "McKneally answers critic, want to drop out UR project", *The Newburgh Evening News*, July 17, 1961.

14. David Rosen Associates Inc., *op. cit.*, 98.

areas was necessary to maintain what was left of property values in the former commercial neighborhood and the tax revenues derived from it.

According to the appraiser hired by the city, population loss and capital flight had been triggered by the overwhelming presence of welfare recipients in the area. "If something is not done immediately to curb the staggering relief rolls in this city," the appraiser explained, "those paying the taxes will greatly accelerate the exodus of taxpaying persons and firms."<sup>15</sup> He claimed he had witnessed "people known for being on relief rolls drinking and carousing on the streets" who "hesitated to leave" the city in spite of the urban renewal project "because they found the Newburgh relief policies more lenient than those" of the county. According to appraisers and city officials, urban renewal was not enough to maintain property values in the city; they also had to get rid of the people who had caused the decline in the first place. Arguing that a majority of African Americans in the area were migrants who had come to Newburgh because of the availability of welfare payments, elected officials turned to a second solution: a stringent welfare reform that would strip the city budget from what they saw as a mass of undeserving recipients.

In order to conduct welfare reform in the city, Republican councilman George McKneally had hired a new city manager, Joseph Mitchell. On November 28, 1960, at the suggestion of George McKneally, Joseph Mitchell appointed a committee to study welfare operations in the city. On May 1, 1961, the city government staged a "muster" of welfare recipients. All recipients, including the aged, the blind, the disabled, and mothers of dependent children, were forced to go to the police station to collect their check, where they underwent verification of identity and audit of eligibility.<sup>16</sup>

On May 8, the committee submitted its report to Joseph Mitchell, which gave further justification to welfare reform by linking welfare costs to migrations and urban decline. The committee had allegedly found that the "steady influx of outsiders, principally from Southern states," had been "the underlying cause in the steadily mounting welfare costs."<sup>17</sup>

According to the report, migrants had come to Newburgh because of "the accessibility of slum housing and the accessibility to welfare payments," which acted as "incentives for the influx of people from out-of-state who will eventually contribute to high caseloads and costs."<sup>18</sup> The

15. "Appraiser sees peril in welfare", *The Newburgh Evening News*, July 21, 1961.

16. Kathryn D. Goodwin, *op. cit.*

17. *Report of the committee to study welfare operations to city manager Joseph Mitchell*, May 8, 1961 Box. 4, Folder "Newburgh Report to Mitchell," Moreland Commission on Welfare. Correspondence and Subject Files. 1961-1963, New York State Archive.

18. *Ibid.*, 15.

report claimed that out of 531 recipients of Aid to Dependent Children, an overwhelming majority of 337 were black.<sup>19</sup> The urban renewal area was particularly prone to “the spread of slums and the rise in Aid to Dependent Children,” causing property value assessments to drop by \$935,880 between 1958 and 1960.<sup>20</sup> The report wrote of black residents of the urban renewal area as an undesirable population who “lacked social organization”<sup>21</sup> and had “low moral values.” “It was not unusual” for recipients of welfare to “have 2 or 3 children born out of wedlock” at the age of 20, the report claimed. By halting the spread of slums, urban renewal would “reduce welfare caseloads,” on the condition that the welfare recipients “affected by urban renewal” were “brought into a more constructive way of life, and more important, if the influx” of African Americans was “ended.”<sup>22</sup>

While there was little doubt as to the racial underpinnings of the report, linking migrations to urban decay, economic decline and rising welfare costs provided city officials with a colorblind justification for reform. On June 20, the city council adopted 13 new welfare regulations that were meant, in Joseph Mitchell’s own words, to “curtail immigration, save money and halt our blight”.<sup>23</sup> All able-bodied men on welfare would be required to work for the city’s building maintenance.<sup>24</sup> Aid would also be denied to all recipients who had refused an employment offer or who had voluntarily left a job. Women who received Aid to Dependent Children would be removed from the rolls if they gave birth to an illegitimate child while receiving aid and a family could be eligible for welfare for no longer than three months. Recipients of ADC also had to report monthly to the municipal court for eligibility verification. Newcomers who applied for welfare had to show evidence that they had come to Newburgh because they had been made a “concrete offer of employment, similar to that required of foreign immigrants”.<sup>25</sup> Councilman George McKneally publicly hoped the reform would “stop the onrush of migrants, regardless

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19. *Ibid.*, Exhibit B. « Ethnic origin of welfare recipients – Aid to Dependent Children ».

20. *Ibid.*, Exhibit L. « Assessed valuation losses in Water Street Area ».

21. *Ibid.*, 16.

22. *Ibid.*, 15.

23. Quoted in Katheryn D. Goodwin, *op. cit.*

24. “Newburgh Welfare Rules.” *The New York Times*. June 24, 1961.

25. *Ibid.*

of race, creed or color,” and “reduce uncontrolled spending of welfare monies.”<sup>26</sup>

In truth, there was little evidence that African Americans disproportionately benefitted from welfare programs or even that public assistance costs had become unbearable for the municipal government. Only 2.9% of the city’s population received welfare and only 130 people had received ADC in May 1961.<sup>27</sup> The city had prosecuted no case of fraud in the past year and unlike what city officials claimed, no newcomer had received ADC in 1960.<sup>28</sup> Finally, while city officials asserted that welfare recipients had numerous illegitimate children, the city had no system for tracking down illegitimate births.<sup>29</sup>

According to the *New York Post*, out of the 915 individuals who had been on public assistance in 1960, all programs included, a majority of 556 were white (61%) and 359 were black (39%).<sup>30</sup> For the leader of Newburgh’s NAACP chapter, the reform, just like the city’s urban renewal plan, was an attempt to drive Black people away from Newburgh for political reasons. “The Republican administration here is using the Negro issue as a political football,” he explained. Because more and more African Americans had registered to vote, he continued, Newburgh, long a Republican stronghold, could become Democratic.<sup>31</sup> While the NAACP attributed the reform to the city’s local politics, the Newburgh plan soon triggered “postwar America’s first national debate about welfare” (Levenstein 17).

### **The National Debate Over Welfare: Local Control, Work, and Taxpayers’ Rights**

Alerted by its Newburgh chapter in June, the NAACP immediately contacted the Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, to demand that immediate action be taken against Newburgh officials.<sup>32</sup> In August,

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26. Robert Richards and Joseph Ritz. “Two Newburgh Councilmen oppose Traveling to Albany.” *The Newburgh Evening News*, June 29, 1961.

27. *In the matter of investigation of administration of public welfare in the city of Newburgh: public hearing*, July 7, 1961, 48, 82. New York Public Library.

28. *Ibid.*, 49, 87.

29. *Ibid.*, 83.

30. Fern Marja Eckman, “Newburgh’s Real Target: The Negroes.” *New York Post*, July 17, 1961.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Gloster Current, memo to Jesse DeVore, June 28, 1961. General Office Files, folder “Government cities Newburgh, N.Y., 1960-1962.” NAACP papers.

the State Supreme Court decided that implementation of the plan was illegal.<sup>33</sup> However, the controversy did not stop there. Between June and December 1961, the Newburgh reform received wide media coverage in the major newspapers and national magazines of the day (Levenstein 17; Gilens 115). Yet, few newspapers investigated the local politics that had produced the reform or tackled race as its core issue. In most accounts, Newburgh was seen as the symptom of a growing problem: welfare programs had failed to reduce dependency and had encouraged idleness and immorality rather than employment among recipients, at the expense of weary taxpayers. For *Look*, “an almost visible wave of resentment had begun to roll across the land against the rackets and abuses that plague the vast, ever-growing American welfare programs”.<sup>34</sup> *Harper’s Magazine* called Newburgh “a miniature of the troubled welfare canvas” across the North.<sup>35</sup> Accounts of the Newburgh story in *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Look* or *Reader’s Digest* insisted on popular support for Newburgh and denounced the “scandal” of welfare: far from being specific to Newburgh, welfare had become a national issue.<sup>36</sup>

The plan was lambasted by liberal politicians and associations. On the Senate floor, Hubert Humphrey, the liberal Senator of Minnesota, denounced the “substitution of police methods for welfare methods.”<sup>37</sup> African American newspapers denounced the plan as “illegal ‘Black Codes’ aimed at the Negro community”.<sup>38</sup> Abraham Ribicoff, Kennedy’s Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, made it clear that requiring work in exchange for ADC was forbidden by federal law.<sup>39</sup>

While the welfare plan had originated in the context of Newburgh’s racial politics, its proponents across the country celebrated the plan in a colorblind advocacy of local control, taxpayer’s rights, and economic

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33. “Court injunction signed on Newburgh code.” *The New York Times*, August 26, 1961.

34. Fletcher Knebel. “Welfare: Has it become a scandal?” *Look*, November 1961.

35. Edgar May. “A way out the welfare mess.” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 1961.

36. See “Where Charity Begins.” *Life*, July 28, 1961; “The Welfare City.” *Time*, July 28, 1961; Kenneth Crawford, “The Miracle Man.” *Newsweek*, August 7, 1961; “The Growing Scandal in Relief.” *US News & World Report*, September 11, 1961; Charles Stevenson. “Children without Fathers.” *Reader’s Digest*, November 7, 1961; “Most of U.S. Favors Newburgh Aid Pla.,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1961; John Averill. “Newburgh Aid Program Raises Political Storm.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 1961.

37. Hubert Humphrey. *Congressional Record*, August 29, 1961, 1637-1641.

38. Thom Blair. “The Newburgh Story.” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 22, 1961.

39. “Ribicoff Upholds Work-Relief if U.S. Funds Are Not Involved.” *The New York Times*, July 20, 1961.

common sense. Local governments across the country adopted resolutions to endorse and even replicate the Newburgh plan. Richmond, VA and Milwaukee, WI<sup>40</sup> as well as numerous rural counties of upstate New York embraced the principle of home rule so as to require recipients to work in exchange for welfare.<sup>41</sup> As cities and counties advocated the right to manage their affairs free from federal interference, prominent conservatives rejoiced. The reform was hailed by the two leading conservative publications of the day, *Human Events* and William Buckley's *National Review* (Barany 153). The *Wall Street Journal* was also enthusiastic over Newburgh's attempt to "eliminate welfare racketeering," "weed the undeserving from the welfare rolls" and "put able-bodied recipients to work for the city."<sup>42</sup> Finally, Barry Goldwater, the conservative Senator of Arizona, called the Newburgh plan "as refreshing as breathing the clean air" of his "native Arizona," as "the abuses in the welfare field" were "mounting".

Popular response to the controversy also showed tremendous support for the Newburgh plan across the country. In August 1961, a Gallup poll revealed that 85% of the public believed there should be work relief for recipients who were able to work.<sup>43</sup> Self-described hard-working, tax-paying citizens demonstrated their support to the Newburgh plan by sending petitions and letters to their elected representatives and to newspaper editors.<sup>44</sup> Originating mostly from the urban and suburban areas of New York State, the letters revealed strong support for tougher anti-fraud regulations, local control, and work requirements. "I wish you would explain to me what is wrong with forcing all able-bodied recipients to

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40. Letter from Norman Sussman, State Senator from Milwaukee, to Nelson Rockefeller, July 21, 1961. Nelson A. Rockefeller gubernatorial records. Office Subject Files. First Administration. Series 37.1 (FA439). Subseries 1: First Administration. Subject: Welfare. File: General. File: City of Newburgh. Folder "August 1961-1962." Rockefeller Archive Center.

41. "New York Resolutions on Work Relief", reprinted in the *Congressional Record*, August 22, 1961. Series 2. Box 346: 7. Folder "Public Assistance-Newburgh. 1959-1962". Kenneth Keating Papers. Rush Rhees Library. Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation. University of Rochester (hereafter Kenneth Keating Papers).

42. "Obligation and Abuse." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 1961; "Newburgh Gets a New Look: Relief Crackdown Boosts Civic Pride." Edwin A. Roberts Jr., *The Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 1961.

43. "The Gallup poll." *The Newburgh Evening News*, August 15, 1961.

44. The following observations are based on the study of a corpus of 258 letters sent to the Governor of New York Nelson Rockefeller, Senator Kenneth Keating, the U.S. Representative Katharine Saint George, the Mayor of New York Robert Wagner Jr., the *Newburgh Evening News* and *The New York Times* between June and August 1961.

work for the city or country which is supporting them with taxpayers' money?" asked Julia Wilson, a resident of the Upper East Side. The writers specifically demanded that welfare recipients be put to work on community projects that would benefit them as taxpayers. "I do not receive pay without work and it would appear to me moral and ethical to expect work from those whom I help support. For example - we see littered parks; dirty public buildings; filthy public wash rooms; schools in need of repair; etc." wrote Jeanne Morris from Queens.<sup>45</sup> Participating in municipal work would strengthen recipients' self-esteem while revamping the dilapidated city centers. "We in New York City should follow the example of Newburgh and require able-bodied welfare 'clients' to work for their benefits", wrote Oliver Grace. "It is disgraceful to have so many on welfare and our city's streets covered with filth. Given the opportunity and brooms and buckets, our welfare recipients could earn themselves self-respect while restoring a long-lost cleanliness to our city."<sup>46</sup> Since recipients were being aided by the taxpayers' money, taxpayers should see a just return for they perceived as their investment. Having recipients work on public projects for the benefit of the community would do just that: "I do not pretend to know the details of the Newburgh crisis," wrote E. Gilbert Barker, from Glens Falls, N.Y., "but I do feel that in principle it is sound for a community to get some constructive return for the relief investment."<sup>47</sup> For these New Yorkers, work requirements were less about putting recipients back to work than about having taxpayers receive something back for the taxes they put into the welfare system. Alerted by the mounting discontent voiced by taxpayers, local governments and conservative hopefuls in the summer of 1961, federal officials were rapidly forced to take a firm stand on welfare reform.

### **Welfare, Work and Federal Reform: The 1962 Public Welfare Amendments**

By putting welfare on the nation's political map, the Newburgh controversy gave momentum to federal reform. Elected officials and welfare professionals agreed that federal programs had to be made more

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45. Julia Wilson; Jeanne Morris, letters to Kenneth Keating, both July 21, 1961. Series 2. Box 162. Folder 1. "Welfare Regulations-Newburgh, NY, 1961." Kenneth Keating Papers.

46. Letter to *The New York Times*, July 18, 1961.

47. Letter to Kenneth Keating, July 17, 1961. Series 2. Box 162. Folder 1. "Welfare Regulations-Newburgh, NY, 1961." Kenneth Keating Papers.

popular in the eyes of the public by curtailing undeserved benefits and promoting work and self-sufficiency.

Newburgh was on everybody's mind when the Kennedy Administration prepared the 1962 Public Welfare Amendments. In September 1961, Abraham Ribicoff, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, had reached the conclusion that welfare was "unpopular. What the public thinks is that we are trying to have more and more people on relief. If the public thinks we are trying to get people off public welfare, our popularity will increase."<sup>48</sup> When Ribicoff wrote to President Kennedy about the department's plan for reform in November, he warned him that welfare laws had become "an explosive issue."<sup>49</sup> "The events in Newburgh and the ensuing flood of publicity throughout the country" had confirmed that "the demand for changes in the welfare laws would become a hot issue." Therefore, Ribicoff stressed the need for a reform that would be appealing to congressional conservatives. "Conservatives are up in arms over the reports of welfare abuses," he told the president. "When we deal specifically with these problems, [...] we will find substantial support from conservatives." Focusing on ending dependency through work measures proved key to gaining that support.

Four days after NBC's *Battle of Newburgh* documentary aired on January 28, 1962, President Kennedy delivered a special message to the Congress, in which he announced welfare reform.<sup>50</sup> "We must find ways of returning far more of our dependent people to independence," Kennedy explained. The best way to achieve this was to put recipients to "sound and useful work." The President finally recommended that the federal government encourage the states to implement "community work and training projects for unemployed people receiving welfare payments."

When the new Public Welfare Amendments were signed into law on July 25, 1962, work was not perceived as the centerpiece of the reform. Its stated goal was to "emphasize rehabilitative and other social services to prevent or reduce dependency."<sup>51</sup> The name Aid to Dependent Children was changed into Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in order to emphasize the "family-centered nature of the program."

48. Bess Furman Armstrong, memo to Wilbur Cohen, September 27, 1961. Box 195. Folder 5: "Task forces, Commissions: Welfare, 1961-1962". Papers of Wilbur Cohen, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter papers of Wilbur Cohen)

49. Abraham Ribicoff, memo to John F. Kennedy, November 1, 1961. Box 137. Folder 2. "Welfare Administration/Social and Rehabilitative Services, Establishment, 1961-1963." Papers of Wilbur Cohen.

50. John F. Kennedy, Special Message to the Congress on Public Welfare Programs, February 1, 1962.

51. State letter 579. Public Welfare Amendments of 1962 – Public law 87-543 (H.R. 10606). New York State. Dept. of Social Services. Commissioner's Office. Local District

Yet, one overlooked aspect of the Amendments was that, for the first time since the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, work requirements were authorized for federal welfare programs. The reform created a new Community Work and Training Program, which made federal funds available for local work relief projects if the states wished to do so. The measure was “designed to conserve and develop work skills” among the unemployed recipients.<sup>52</sup> States had the right to deny public assistance to an unemployed parent who refused “without good cause to accept any employment for which he is qualified and which is offered either through the public employment service or is otherwise offered by an employer.” Even though the work provisions of the 1962 Amendments merely encouraged states to implement such measures (Bertram 45), it was the first time that ADC, now AFDC, was used as a “welfare-to-work” program.

### Conclusion

The history of the American welfare state has rarely been written from the perspective of the local governments and ordinary citizens who, starting in the 1950s and 1960s, were increasingly unwilling to pay for welfare. The local politics of welfare and local attempts at shaping social policy have therefore been overlooked. Yet, taking the local perspective into greater account may well enrich scholars’ understanding of welfare reform in postwar America. While the chronology of workfare in the United States usually starts in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Bertram 65), this article has shown that local assaults on welfare had a transformative effect on federal legislation long before the 1970s, notably on work requirements. As shown by the Newburgh controversy, many local officials still considered social policy as a local prerogative and sought to control and restrict federal programs. While the Newburgh reform had been entangled in the local politics of race and urban decline, proponents of welfare reform nationwide celebrated the city’s action in a colorblind defense of taxpayer’s rights and local control, thus providing a broader impetus for reform. Scholars may therefore need to reconsider the history of the welfare state through the lens of local governments and explore how grassroots mobilizations against welfare influenced policy choices made at the different levels of the American government.

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52. *Ibid.*

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