

Newt Gingrich's War on Poor People

Written by George E. Curry

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Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich launched a nuclear attack on the needy last week by using ugly stereotypes to argue that people are poor because they are lazy and the solution to widespread poverty is scrapping child labor laws and putting poor kids to work in menial jobs.

He said in a speech in Council Bluffs, Iowa: "Start with the following two facts: Really poor children in really poor neighborhoods have no habits of working and have nobody around them who works. So they literally have no habit of showing up on Monday. They have no habit of staying all day. They have no habit of 'I do this and you give me cash' unless it's illegal."

What planet does Gingrich live on?

My entire childhood was spent in poverty and I can't remember a time that my mother and stepfather didn't have a job. In fact, I can't remember a time when Mama didn't have at least two jobs. I've held jobs since I was in the 6th grade, jobs that included cutting the grass of my elementary school principal, delivering newspapers, washing dishes at the University of Alabama while I was a student at Druid High School in Tuscaloosa, and working as a waiter on trains during Christmas breaks while enrolled at Knoxville College in Tennessee.

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Evidently, my experience was not atypical. An analysis of Census Bureau data by Andrew A. Beveridge, a professor at Queens College in New York, found that most children live in a home where at least one parent works. In fact, three of every four poor working-aged adults have jobs.

The problem isn't that those living below the poverty line are unwilling to work. The problem is that their jobs don't pay enough to lift them out of poverty, which is defined as \$22,050 for a family of four.

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, "Nearly 15 million children in the United States – 21 percent of all children – live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level – \$22,050 a year for a family of four. Research shows that, on average, families need an income of about twice that level to cover basic expenses. Using that standard, 42% of children live in low-income families."

Gingrich falsely asserts that poor children don't have a work ethic except when it comes to illegal activity. His solution is to repeal child labor laws and put poor kids to work as library assistants or assistant janitors.

Federal law already allows young people to work.

The Department of Labor notes, "The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) sets 14 as the minimum age for most non-agricultural work. However, at any age, youth may deliver newspapers, perform in radio, television, movie, or theatrical productions, work in businesses owned by their parents (except in mining, manufacturing or hazardous jobs), and perform babysitting or perform minor chores around a private home."

Republicans have a record of railing against welfare, labor unions and the poor as part of their political strategy. During his 1976 presidential campaign, for example, Ronald Reagan told the story of a woman from Chicago's South Side who had 80 aliases, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards, collected veteran's benefits on four non-existent husbands, received Medicaid, got food stamps and collected welfare under each of her fake names, netting her tax-free income of more than id=mce_marker50,000. It was later determined that the woman resided only in Reagan's head.

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Like Reagan, Gingrich has sought to eliminate many federal programs that assist poor people.

In 1994, he proposed kicking young mothers off of welfare and using that money to create Boys Town-like orphanages. The New York Times observed in an editorial, "The party that professes to support family values seems excessively eager to yank poor children away from their mothers and dump them in institutions."

He also opposes extending unemployment benefits for those unable to find a job.

In an Aug. 12, 2011 e-mail to supporters, Gingrich claimed "the extension of unemployment benefits has given people a perverse incentive to stay on unemployment rather than accept a job."

The only thing perverse is Gingrich's inability to understand that most people do not choose to be either poor or unemployed.

In an attempt to smear President Obama, Gingrich has repeatedly called him "the most successful food stamp president in American history."

Gingrich asserted, "We have people who take their food stamp money and use it to go to Hawaii."

First, what was known as food stamps has been called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, since October 2008. Instead of using old paper food stamps, recipients are issued a plastic card similar to a bank debit-card to make grocery purchases. Second, the program has specific limitations of what can be bought with the funds, excluding such items as beer, liquor and wine.

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The average monthly "food stamp" benefit is id=mce_marker33.49. That's not enough to purchase an airline ticket to Hawaii on Southwest, Jet Blue or any other cheap carrier.

We should not be surprised by anything Gingrich says. This is the same person who claimed he "helped balance the federal budget for four straight years [1998 to 2001]." He wasn't even in office those last two years.

Gingrich will say anything, even if he knows it is a lie.

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