



(c) Newsday

New York Newsday - August 29, 1994

## **Republicans: Our Great Social Spenders**

The battle for a crime bill is over, but the war of words is just beginning. Democrats, no longer vulnerable to the "soft on crime" label, are being attacked for spending on "social programs" - an all-purpose label that encompasses anything that doesn't support a holster or a prison cell.

Both the Democrats and the Republicans have forgotten that public spending for social purposes is neither wasteful nor new; in fact, the United States is built on public initiatives that have created opportunities for individuals to improve their lives and their communities - but we don't call it social spending.

Historically, the Republicans and like-minded predecessors were the earliest proponents of major domestic programs while Democrats resisted any expansion of the federal government's powers. In 1808 when Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin proposed a 10-year \$20-million program to build roads, turnpikes and canals, arguing that the "external" or social benefits would help the entire nation. Democrats opposed Gallatin's bold program and Presidents Madison, Monroe and Jackson successively vetoed programs to improve domestic transportation. Southern Democrats especially felt that the expansion of federal powers that might eventually threaten their system of slavery.

The political debate on the crime bill has demonstrated that neither the public nor the members of Congress realize that the federal government is responsible for the beaches, colleges, hiking trails, and even ski slopes that so many Americans use.

Ever since the Civil War it has been Republican presidents who have found new ways to use federal funds to build the nation's recreational, educational and physical infrastructure. The land grant colleges were started under Lincoln; Theodore Roosevelt, a former New York City Police Commissioner, established five national parks, two national game preserves and 51 wild bird refuges; Herbert Hoover proposed the creation of the Public Works Administration which, along with the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, was eventually established under FDR; and the nation's interstate highway system was launched by Eisenhower. Of course, Ronald Reagan used the threat of the "evil empire" to justify public investment in research, development and high-tech industries.

The crime bill debate has highlighted the principal flaw of the Democrats in the 1990s: they have yet to offer a compelling and persuasive rationale for crime prevention that is consistent with the American tradition of large-scale public spending. The problem with the crime bill is that there is too little - not too much - real pork that will create jobs and sustain economic development in inner-city neighborhoods.

Ironically, the crime bill may do more to prevent crime in small towns than it will in large cities, since it will generate both temporary and permanent jobs for low-skilled workers to build and staff the new prisons - most of which are likely to be built in hinterland communities.

The debate over the crime bill is not over; it will reappear next year in the fight for federal appropriations; the challenge for the Democrats is to find a better rationale and a new name for the "social" programs they want. If the federal government can spend taxpayers' money to help property owners in Westhampton Beach, surely the Democrats can be inventive enough to create an inner-city equivalent to the beach erosion and protection of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Perhaps no program has received more unjustified criticism than midnight basketball, an activity that already serves thousands of kids across New York State. What makes midnight basketball any less worthy than night skiing on federal forest lands or camping overnight in national parks?

---

(C) 1999 Mitchell Moss