

Computerizing a Covenant: Contract Liberalism and the Nationalization of Welfare Administration*

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There are few things liberal politicians claim to hate as much as politics. And, throughout the second half of the twentieth century in the United States, there were few issues more politicized than welfare. Welfare was politicized because in the 1960s poor people, led by Black women, organized to make it so, as a strategy to access basic entitlements. In response, elected officials, policy professionals, and campaign strategists increasingly crafted a politics of welfare designed to inflame and mobilize white resentment. Across the political spectrum, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which most Americans simply called “welfare,” became a representative example of political failure—a publicly elevated manifestation of how the electoral process had failed to produce a sufficient, let alone popular, welfare state. With a stated goal of modernizing welfare, and a complementary goal of preserving their political futures, the great aspiration of many liberals then was to *depoliticize* welfare by turning a contested and deeply politicized social policy into a technical problem of good governance.

So, in response to racialized rights claims of the 1960s, and the racist tropes of the “welfare queen” in the 1970s and of the “deadbeat dad” in the 1980s, liberals worked to automate, professionalize, and nationalize welfare. Liberals believed that they could diminish the political potency of welfare as an inflammatory political issue by computerizing welfare administration. By the 1980s,

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for welfare recipients, computers were everywhere. With these networked technologies, liberals constructed a specific social contract in which anti-poverty payments would be tracked as debts using the seemingly objective mechanisms of computerized accounting. In their attempt to bound the politics of welfare, liberals transformed welfare's underlying logic from a rights-based liberalism to contract-based liberalism. Computerization animated this ideological shift.

If caseworkers once came to the homes of welfare claimants or interviewed them face-to-face in local offices, they increasingly spent their time entering claimants' data into networked computing systems.¹ In Wisconsin, parents receiving AFDC told their Social Security numbers to caseworkers who entered the number into Wisconsin's Computer Reporting Network (CRN) and recorded which jobs or job-training programs recipients sought as a condition of receiving payments.² In North Dakota, the state's Technical Eligibility Computer System (TECS) produced summary reports of state benefits and asked welfare recipients to identify absent parents who might be sought out to offset the cost of those benefits. Using the Mississippi Application Verification Eligibility Reporting and Information Control System (MAVERICS), caseworkers in Mississippi entered two-letter marital-status codes into a database to automatically trigger child support collection processes. Through California's Uniform Welfare Information System (UWIS), more than one hundred thousand poor noncustodial fathers felt the effects of a tax-refund intercept program that automatically deducted child support payments from tax refunds before anti-poverty checks ever arrived in mailboxes.³

These computerized tools not only reformulated the locally administered system of welfare, they also nationalized it. Citizens could be tracked and surveilled across jurisdictions because computer systems themselves were similar or interoperable using common standards. Wisconsin's CRN resembled California's UWIS, while North Dakota's TECS and Mississippi's MAVERICS were practically indistinguishable. Indeed, a limited network of private vendors had sold

¹Ethnographers have been attuned to the role of computers mediating experience of the welfare state. Virginia Eubanks, *Digital Dead End: Fighting for Social Justice in the Information Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); John Gilliom, *Overseers of the Poor: Surveillance, Resistance, and the Limits of Privacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

²John Stevens and Robert McGowan, *Information Systems and Public Management* (New York: Praeger, 1985): 96–99.

³David Burnham, *The Rise of the Computer State* (New York: Random House, 1983): 29–30; David Dery, *Computers in Welfare: The MIS-Match* (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications, 1981).

and resold analogous digital tools.⁴ In a distinct manifestation of federalism, states shared and repurposed hardware and software. Interoperable computer systems, especially those designed and sold by private-sector contractors, determined public-sector administrative capacity and practices.⁵ By the 1980s, the result was steady convergence upon a set of integrated, interstate administrative tools and strategies. Such technological federalism created a shared national infrastructure for welfare administration, an area long the purview of states.⁶ Nationally policymakers came to assume that extraordinary levels of individualized tracking, sorting, monitoring, wage garnishing, and accounting were operationally straightforward.

The widespread availability of these technologies was particularly appealing to a liberal professional class that embraced computers as the quintessential symbol of their modern policy perspective.⁷ Computerized government systems, they hoped, would be and feel professional, offering both a metaphor and the mechanism for new projects of modern liberal governance. Guided by a “pragmatic idealism,” these liberals saw the horizon of political possibility through the lens of what they deemed technologically achievable.⁸ Computerization, as sold by contractors, imagined by reformers, and actualized in numerous state agencies as a tool for surveilling individuals and recouping costs, determined the

⁴These changes also parallel federal funding to states for technological “modernization” of law enforcement. Elizabeth Hinton, in *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁵Recent scholarship on liberalism sees reliance on private-sector tools not as a rejection of the liberal project but as a core strategy for liberals in desperate need of state capacity for liberal policy aims. These tools corresponded to a shift to the conception of the citizen as client or customer. Brent Cebul, *Illusions of Progress: Business, Poverty, and Liberalism in the American Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023); Claire Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Amy Offner, *Sorting out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Lily Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁶On the role of federalism in welfare, including federal funds to coordinate state practices, see Karen Tani, *States of Dependency: Welfare, Rights, and American Governance, 1935–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁷Margaret O’Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019); Lily Geismer, “Atari Democrats,” *Jacobin*, February 8, 2016; Daniel Greene, *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021): 29–58; Marc Aidinoff, “Centrists against the Center: The Jeffersonian Politics of a Decentralized Internet,” in *Abstractions and Embodiments: New Histories of Computing and Society*, eds. Janet Abbate and Stephanie Dick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022): 40–59.

⁸The phrase “pragmatic idealism” comes from Charles Peters as part of his effort to remake and rebrand liberalism in “A Neo-Liberal’s Manifesto,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 1982. Lily Geismer, *Left Behind: The Democrats’ Failed Attempt to Solve Inequality* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022).

bounds of what the idealized “functional” welfare system could be, and therefore the contours of what many liberals hoped it should do.⁹ Computing networks powered a specific theory of operational modernization in which the federal government would become more popular, or at least less unpopular, with a centrist white electorate if administrative systems became more efficient and discerning through technological innovation. Crucially, liberals also believed that with the digitally automated mechanism of contract, AFDC could be discussed without reference to race or rights.

This mutual reinforcement of the technology of computerized case management and the idea of welfare as a contract was the foundation for the “new consensus” articulated in the spring of 1987, by the old stalwart of liberal governance, New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and the prominent advocate for updating liberalism, Arkansas governor Bill Clinton.¹⁰ At a Senate hearing on welfare, Clinton touted the new welfare case-management technologies for enforcing a reciprocal contract. Moynihan was thrilled, elevating Clinton’s language of contract to the loftier language of “covenant”: “Governor Clinton spoke about ‘contract,’ that you owe the society something, and the society owes you something . . . And that is what the whole notion of American Democracy is about, that notion of ‘covenant.’ It is a powerful idea.”¹¹ That idea led to more federal funding for case management systems to account for AFDC payments as debt, primarily as sums owed by noncustodial parents through child support payments. Digitally tracked child-support payments went directly to the state

⁹A key insight of Science and Technology Studies reveals how policymakers and technical experts alike conflate normative and descriptive claims about technologies. This chapter therefore reads claims about computers as an archive of what policymakers thought effective welfare administration ought to be. On the co-constitution of prescriptive and descriptive see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Sheila Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisers as Policymakers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende’s Chile* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

¹⁰Political scientist Eva Bertram concluded that in negotiations leading up to the Family Support Act of 1988 there was among liberals “a retreat from the New Deal notion of a welfare entitlement owed to recipients by government, to the concept of a ‘reciprocal obligation.’” Eva Bertram, *The Workfare State: Public Assistance Politics from the New Deal to the New Democrats* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015): 152; Nancy A. Naples, “The ‘New Consensus’ on the Gendered ‘Social Contract’: The 1987–1988 U.S. Congressional Hearings on Welfare Reform,” *Signs* 22, no. 4 (1997): 907–45. On the power and the consequences of the contract metaphor see Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “Contract versus Charity: Why Is There No Social Citizenship in the United States?” *Socialist Review* (January 1992).

¹¹New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, US Congress, Senate, Committee on Finance: Hearings on Welfare Reform, part 1 of 3, 100th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 1987: 33.

coffers to offset any AFDC payments the custodial parent received. Instead of AFDC operating as an entitlement that ostensibly underwrote independence, it had become a strange type of contracted loan that noncustodial parents paid off.¹²

Computerization therefore enabled an update to a nineteenth-century story, the move from status to contract. Late-nineteenth-century liberals believed that the status of citizenship offered poor citizens, especially Black women, few protections against poverty, but a marriage or labor contract could.¹³ Late-twentieth-century liberals again sought to move from status-based entitlements (for being a citizen or for being a mother) to now-automated contracts. Again, they sought to privatize responsibility and anti-poverty efforts. This computerized covenant was similar to a marriage contract; it privatized the cost associated with children to parents. But crucially, the debt relationship enabled by the child-support enforcement system was not a marriage contract. It joined people who in most cases had actively chosen not to be joined in marriage, in an ongoing relationship.¹⁴ The computerized debt contract functioned as an alternative to marriage by preserving some of the perceived benefits of privatized financial responsibility, while acknowledging that the state could no longer, or would not, mandate marriage. The state was again facilitator and enforcer of privatized contract, but also a party to the contract—actively intervening to collect debt payments. Gone was the covenant sanctified by God and county clerk, and in its place was a debt contract, legitimized, liberals hoped, by nationally interoperable state computers.

The work of computerizing the welfare state and contracting its rights, then, was

¹²Felicia Kornbluh and Gwendolyn Mink, *Ensuring Poverty: Welfare Reform in Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019): esp. 42–56; Libby Adler and Janet Halley, “‘You Play, You Pay’: Feminists and Child Support Enforcement in the United States,” in *Governance Feminism: Notes from the Field*, eds. Janet Halley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019): 287–316; Alison Lefkowitz’s *Strange Bedfellows: Marriage in the Age of Women’s Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) 127–129.

¹³Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017): esp. 238–39; Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2017): esp. 78–82.

¹⁴While many liberals championed programs to promote marriage and “traditional” family values (see Lefkowitz, *Strange Bedfellows* and Cooper, *Family Values* among others,) liberals’ embrace of the debt contract can still be read as a retreat from marriage, or at least a be-grudging conclusion that marriage as it existed by the end of the century was not a sufficiently effective resource for privatizing the costs of poverty reduction.

distributed and prolonged: linking records like Louisiana and Texas’s welfare databases in 1980, passing the Family Support Act of 1988, and operating a suite of the child-support enforcement tools in states like Mississippi in the 1990s. The result was a national welfare system remade as an automated reciprocal obligation, all before the passage of Clinton’s famed 1996 welfare bill. As an extractive force, this networked national welfare state proved robust, able to collect debts across all fifty states. As a political entity the national welfare state was weak, its opacity and newly nationalized status leaving it vulnerable to the very national reforms that would end liberal welfare entitlements altogether.

Welfare as We Knew It

Computerization and New Deal liberalism emerged together. Title II of the Social Security Act of 1935 established “Federal Old-Age Benefits”—the program still called “Social Security”—as retirement income for a tightly bounded class of disproportionately white male citizens. Social Security relied on nationalized accounting and computing from the start. The work of tabulating each citizen in a national system through a numeric identifier fell to International Business Machines (IBM). By 1937, the federal government had issued Social Security numbers to twenty-six million workers that required four hundred IBM accounting machines and more than eight hundred keypunches.¹⁵ These machines kept a careful ledger of what citizens had “paid” into the system through payroll taxes to determine future retirement payments. As historian Linda Gordon described it, Social Security relied on “a legal fiction that contracts had been established between government and citizen, or more specifically between government and worker.”¹⁶ Computerization recorded and transacted that contract.¹⁷

Title IV of the Social Security Act established “Grants to States for Aid to Dependent Children” (ADC) the precursor to AFDC welfare. In sharp contrast to Social Security, ADC administration relied on paper notes written longhand and the human judgement of state and local welfare administrators. Those sub-national officers guided caseworkers who assessed a poor family’s deservingness

¹⁵Robert Sobel, *IBM: Colossus in Transition* (New York: Times Books, 1981): 82.

¹⁶Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890–1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994): 295.

¹⁷Sarah Igo, *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018): 55–98; Daniel Bouk, *How Our Days Became Numbered: Risk and the Rise of the Statistical Individual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 227–44.

of cash payments. While Social Security retirement checks proved a reliable source of middle-class stability, welfare checks did not. Welfare administration was stingy, stigmatizing, and disciplinary. It was a project of controlling poor women in exchange for meager support. By the 1960s both the left and right attacked the welfare system.¹⁸ Contrary to Social Security’s contract-based respectability, welfare was ensnared in a negative feedback loop, in which, as Gordon puts it, “the modern pejorative meaning of ‘welfare’ results from the debasing conditions of receiving public assistance, but it also causes them.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, welfare as a status-based entitlement in which certain Americans received cash payments was a historic accomplishment, setting important social and fiscal precedents even as its benefits were limited²⁰ Unlike many state or federal anti-poverty programs that relied on annual or discretionary appropriations, Congress authorized funds for ADC to be “appropriated for each fiscal year thereafter” as mandatory funding.²¹ Situating welfare as an entitlement was also an operational achievement. As historian Karen Tani has shown, it was federal administrators who, following the passage of the Social Security Act, used the framework of a welfare entitlement or welfare rights to enforce adherence to national standards for economic relief.²² By the 1960s, rights claims were the explicit language of political organizing, resulting in the successful establishment of local minimum standards and procedural safeguards.²³

As the entitlement expanded and welfare recipients were increasingly non-white and not widows, broader political support for a right to welfare weakened.²⁴

¹⁸For overviews see Amy Zanoni, “Remembering Welfare as We Knew It: Understanding Neoliberalism through Histories of Welfare,” *Journal of Policy History* 35, no. 1 (January 2023): 118–58 and Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, updated ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

¹⁹Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled*, 2.

²⁰Lizabeth Cohen, for example, argues that workers saw New Deal welfare programs as more than charity and often as an entitlement from the beginning, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 251–90.

²¹The Social Security Act, Public Law 74-271 (49 Stat. 620), approved August 14, 1935, Title IV.

²²Tani, *States of Dependency*.

²³Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005); Martha Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement, 1960–1973* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁴Premilla Nadasen, “From Widow to ‘Welfare Queen’: Welfare and the Politics of Race,” *Black Women, Gender and Families* 1, no. 2 (2007): 52–77; Felicia Kornbluh, “Political Arithmetic and Racial Division in the Democratic Party,” *Social Policy* 26, no. 3 (March 22,

Conservatives were committed to dismantling welfare while making the program more punitive, and they sharpened their ability to leverage the issue of welfare, along with racist tropes, for political gain. Liberals undermined welfare with both earnest and cynical reforms.²⁵ They developed policy and political critiques of welfare as a threat to traditional two-parent households. After the failure in 1972 of a guaranteed minimum income—President Nixon’s Family Assistance Program, spearheaded by Moynihan—most liberals stopped defending welfare altogether. They feared the issue was too racialized and risked associating the entire liberal project with inflammatory rhetoric around “entitled” single Black mothers.²⁶

Instead of defending the idea of entitlement or the citizens accused of “being entitled,” liberal policymakers sought to reform program administration. They turned again to bureaucratic regulations and legal proceduralism.²⁷ During the late 1970s and into the 1980s, those new regulatory codes and procedures were increasingly expressed as computer code.²⁸ If computerization had helped create the contractual insurance of Social Security, in the case of AFDC welfare it would ultimately dismantle an entitlement.

Constructing a National Infrastructure of Individualized Calculation

While national actors debated welfare as an abstraction, state-level civil servants were responsible for making the welfare state function. In Louisiana that task fell to Herb Sumrall, who became the administrator of the Office of Economic

1996): 49–64.

²⁵Both Jennifer Mittelstadt and Alice O’Connor attend to the ways the work of often well-intentioned liberal academics and policymakers repeatedly undermined the anti-poverty efforts and social rights. Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁶Marisa Chappell argues that after 1972, “the antipoverty coalition—both middle-class liberals and grassroots antipoverty activists consciously neglected defending AFDC in its effort to keep white, working class voters in the Democratic fold.” *War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 17.

²⁷Austin Sarat, “The Law Is All Over: Power, Resistance and the Legal Consciousness of the Welfare Poor,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 2, no. 2 (1990): 343–80; Tani, States of Dependency, 8.

²⁸I treat code as enacting legal reforms, similar to but not synonymous with law. Lawrence Lessig, *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Cornelia Vismann and Markus Krajewski, “Computer Juridisms,” *Grey Room* 29 (October 2007): 90–109.

Security in 1979 as the national welfare debate intensified.²⁹ Sumrall had previously worked in state information services where he fielded complaints when new technologies designed to collect revenue displayed a “very human habit” of “starting to act generally cranky, followed by outright refusal to work.”³⁰ More than sluggish computers, Sumrall struggled with the federated, state-by-state structure of the welfare system. The federal government maintained some regulatory standards of national uniformity, and each state operated its own welfare department. Sumrall’s programmatic responsibilities had ended at the borders of the state, but national and local politics of welfare put increasing pressure on administrators like Sumrall to expand their purview.

Sumrall and state agency colleagues worried that state autonomy weakened its welfare system, particularly as politicians led by Senator Russell Long (D-LA) encouraged administrators to root out welfare fraud.³¹ Sumrall focused on hypothetical citizens double-dipping by receiving welfare benefits in multiple states and workers who underreported their income, sometimes by working in multiple states. Under the federated system, Louisiana and Texas maintained separate administrative apparatuses to manage national welfare programs—the Louisiana Department of Labor and the Texas Department of Human Resources each processed their state’s payments. If a Louisianan moved to Texas, that person might have a national Social Security card, but the rest of the paperwork required starting from scratch to access federal entitlements. The former Louisianan would go to a county office in Texas and sit for an intake interview. After recording that person’s information, a caseworker would extend or deny financial support to Texas’s newest resident. Although that caseworker could, and occasionally did, place a call to the neighboring state, information rarely crossed the Sabine River, even as families regularly did.

States compared strategies about how they might use computing and internal databases to better manage case files and track claimants. Despite the incredible mathematical ability of 1970s and 1980s computing (the reason why states signed large computing contracts for engineers building roads and bridges) and the rise of the personal computer (the dominant historiographic story for the period), for a state administrator like Sumrall, a computer was a tool for ac-

²⁹“Sumrall Named to Post,” *Daily Advertiser* (Lafayette, LA), January 18, 1979.

³⁰Donald C. Brown Jr., “State Computer System Had Very Human Habit,” *Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), March 13, 1974.

³¹“Long Will Address Employment Meet,” *Daily Review* (Morgan City, LA), September 14, 1979.

counting welfare payments over time and across jurisdictions. Sumrall would have known how in the spring of 1980 the Arkansas Social Services Division matched state welfare rolls against state employment records. As a result, they cut off cash support for 2,439 welfare recipient and reduced payments for 510 more. Arkansas governor Clinton heralded this accomplishment as just the beginning of an effort that “could save millions and millions of dollars.”³² That winter, Louisiana and Texas began sharing an integrated computer system for tracking welfare expenditures. In theory, according to one journalist, integrating systems meant that a complete history of the claimant’s past aid would be “available at a push of a button.” Sumrall promised the integrated approach would “help stop welfare fraud or tax fraud.” The “hookup” was “touted as the first of its kind in the nation.”³³

Welfare agencies did not simply “hook” into each other—these connections required significant investments in hardware and software. Literal wires, mostly copper, connected states with distinct case-management procedures. Even with physical linkages, states had incommensurable data sets. County records were rarely uniform throughout the state. How would the accounting problem be possible? One approach drew on the model and infrastructure of Social Security to use computing technologies to tally outlays and associate those figures with a government-issued number. Administrators like Sumrall tried to repurpose Social Security numbers, but many AFDC recipients did not have or did not want to share Social Security numbers, nor did the state did trust applicants to report their numbers honestly.³⁴ Instead, states relied on systems of name-matching, which were technologically more sophisticated, correspondingly less reliable, and legally tenuous.³⁵ By associating ever more information with each individual name, an increasingly robust capacity was emerging to enable individualized welfare accounting.

State interoperability depended upon not just geographic proximity and hard-wired connections, but also the flow of software and computer professionals. The Mississippi Central Data Processing Authority, the agency charged with

³²Bill Simmons, “Arkansas Pares Rolls of ADC Recipients,” *Times* (Shreveport, LA), March 20, 1980.

³³Guy Coates, “Computer May Stop Cheaters,” *Greenwood Commonwealth* (Baton Rouge, LA), December 30, 1980.

³⁴David Flaherty, *Protecting Privacy in Surveillance Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992): 344–359; Igo, *Known Citizen*, 221–63.

³⁵Office of Technology Assessment, “Federal Government Information Technology: Electronic Record Systems and Individual Privacy” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1986), Princeton University Archive, Princeton, NJ: 43.

computerizing welfare administration in Mississippi, also prioritized interconnectivity with Louisiana and Texas, and considered repurposing Texas’s System for Application and Verification Eligibility Reporting and Referral (SAVERR). Despite the acronym, Texas’s system saved neither time nor money; the software had overwhelmed the outdated UNIVAC equipment, so Mississippi had to turn to North Dakota for a model.³⁶ As one manager put it, Mississippi “basically lifted North Dakota’s program.”³⁷

A network of professional private-sector technicians, consultants, and salespeople, primarily associated with IBM, made these exchanges and adaptations possible. The Mississippi Data Processing Authority intended “to transfer both concept and code and agreed to limit modifications” to accommodate regional administrative idiosyncrasies, like Mississippi’s two-month budget cycle. Contractors submitted bids in the fall of 1985 to assist with efforts to transfer the North Dakota Technical Eligibility Computer System (TECS) to Mississippi.³⁸ TECS, it turned out, was not even native to North Dakota—its underlying code was originally crafted for Alaska. The analogous or interoperable hardware and software contractors sold and installed formed the connective tissue among public-sector agencies and with the federal government.³⁹ For decades, IBM’s business model relied on an army of aggressive salespeople working to navigate the public sector.⁴⁰ North Dakota acquired Alaska’s welfare administration system after a helpful call from a contractor who suggested repurposing Alaska’s welfare eligibility system.⁴¹ Indeed, IBM’s network of consultants and salespeople helped states navigate federal approval processes, the prerequisites for federal funding. As the federated, procedurally complex, but increasingly interoperable national welfare system emerged, contracts begat contractors who begat more contracts.

Common technical standards unified these systems, and because of its mar-

³⁶Christy Hoppe, “Welfare Is Spindled and Folded,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, April 22, 1979.

³⁷Carole Lawes, “Welfare Workers in County Taste the Age of Computers,” *Bolivar Commercial* (Cleveland, MS), March 18, 1987.

³⁸Mississippi Department of Human Services, “MAVERICS: Advance Planning Document,” September 1991: 6, box 31530, folder: Management Information Services Correspondence, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS (hereafter MDAH).

³⁹If scholars like Brian Balogh have turned our attention to the role of contractors as critical elements of state power, this chapter treats those contractors as vectors of expertise and as agents of federalism. They link state and federal capacity. Brian Balogh, *The Associational State: American Governance in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁴⁰James Cortada, *The Digital Hand Volume III: How Computers Changed the Work of American Public Sector Industries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴¹Kevin Whalen, “State Gets Lucky with Computer,” *Bismarck Tribune*, July 19, 1984.

ket dominance, IBM often determined those standards. Occasionally a state chose to contract with a different vendor, but rarely did the state reject IBM-compatible standards.⁴² IBM standards enabled a common technical infrastructure—Systems Network Architecture, or SNA—to facilitate sales across states as well as additions to existing systems.⁴³ This architectural choice, according to IBM, was a “logical structure, formats, protocols (rules), and operational sequences for transmitting information through networks and controlling their configuration and operation.” IBM recognized that “SNA needs to be understood in a larger sense. Not only is SNA a specification, it is also a means for structuring a network and a set of products with which to assemble such a network.”⁴⁴ In other words, IBM set a standard for interoperability, and interoperability was the means to overcome the limitations of a federated welfare system. With each new contract, IBM and its allied vendors were making a national welfare state. Indeed, administrators felt they needed SNA for fear that opening the door to multiple standards could lead to “chaos.” One state official in Mississippi explained that a commitment to IBM “provides guidelines for tactical decisions that promote consistency and compatibility as the pieces of the puzzle come together.”⁴⁵ IBM’s SNA was in practice a nationalizing network of networks—making distinct state apparatuses compatible and interoperable across various databases and programs.

IBM also sold a professionalized ethos which was particularly meaningful for besieged welfare administrators and professional-class liberal policymakers alike. Contemporaneous studies showed that the most important feature of a computerized welfare system for state or local welfare offices trying to manage federal auditors was making civil servants appear “competent.” Case-management technologies were especially valuable. The true worth of these tools, the information scholar Rob Kling argued, was “administrative attractiveness,” not “administrative efficiency.”⁴⁶ One internal state-agency evaluation reported that “automa-

⁴²As Geraldo Con Diaz has noted in his history of intellectual property law, IBM effectively positioned itself as the expert on which regulators would rely in *Software Rights: How Patent Law Transformed Software Development in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁴³Andrew Russell, *Open Standards and the Digital Age: History, Ideology, and Networks*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴⁴“Systems Network Architecture: Concepts and Products” (Durham, NC: IBM Corporation, 1984): 1–4.

⁴⁵Frank Stebbins, “‘New Direction’ for State Information System: Briefing for CDPA Employees,” January 11, 1988: 3, series 1616: Policy and Planning Committee files, 1986–1994, box 6512, MDAH.

⁴⁶Rob Kling, “Automated Welfare Client-Tracking and Service Integration: The Political

tion has added a professional dimension” to determining eligibility.⁴⁷ In the face of compounding political critiques of the nation’s welfare system, computerization promised to brand welfare administration as modern, efficient, and professional—a liberal’s dream, regardless of how well it worked. Indeed, if the rising liberal professional class shaped momentous transformations of American governance after the 1970s, computers held the promise of turning anyone, even a government caseworker, into a professional.

With new professional capacities came new governing possibilities. TECS and MAVERICS were case management software with which case workers translated information from potential welfare recipients into machine-recognizable codes. Initially, the system collected self-reported income, number of children, and employment status, and new modules were continuously added. By 1985, as fig. 1 shows, computerized accompaniment techniques for anti-poverty technologies were deployed in the majority of states. The result was an accounting system that not only worked across state lines and recorded the amount of AFDC money issued but also held the potential to locate funds that could offset costs. These technical updates would prove particularly appealing as welfare reform again moved to the center of national political debates.

Fathers of Liberal Reform

Daniel Patrick Moynihan spent most of his career trying to reform welfare. Since 1955, when he began work on New York State’s poverty programs, through domestic-policy leadership positions in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, and in the Senate, Moynihan hewed to a centrist liberalism marked by a defense of government support constrained by what he saw as pragmatic concern for creating dependency.⁴⁸ By the spring of 1987, the sixty-year-old senator was closer than ever to shepherding a “new consensus” on welfare reform. He was aided by the work of the National Governors Association led by Bill Clinton. Over the previous two decades, as economic growth slowed and budgets tightened, states like Clinton’s Arkansas had become increasingly both

Economy of Computing,” *Communications of the ACM* 21, no. 6 (June 1978): 488–89 and “Computerization and Social Transformations,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 16, no. 3 (July 1991): 342–67.

⁴⁷Mississippi Department of Human Services, “MAVERICS,” 61.

⁴⁸Moynihan had an ambivalent relationship with the label “liberal” as part of his electoral project. Patrick Andelic, “Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the 1976 New York Senate Race, and the Struggle to Define American Liberalism,” *Historical Journal* 57, no. 4 (December 2014): 1111–33; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Liberals’ Dilemma,” *New Republic*, January 22, 1977.

laboratories for punitive approaches to welfare administration and sites of resistance to those restrictive and incipiently carceral regimes.⁴⁹ Learning from these state-level experiments, Clinton asserted that all welfare recipients “should sign a contract with the State, making a personal commitment in return for benefits to pursue an individually developed path to independence.”⁵⁰ This commitment to treat welfare as a reciprocal agreement “in exchange for benefits” formed the foundation of Clinton and Moynihan’s agreement.

Clinton and Moynihan’s accord corresponded to a strong underlying belief shared by many liberals and conservatives that the breakdown of the family structure explained poverty generally, and Black poverty in particular. Moynihan spoke of the “18-year contract” between a parent and child. Speaking from the Senate dais to an imagined noncustodial parent not paying the costs of raising a child, Moynihan scolded: “You just have to understand that if you are going to bring children into the world, you are going to have to support them for 18 years.”⁵¹ Moynihan had been chastising that imagined parent his whole career. Moynihan’s name had become synonymous with his infamous 1965 diagnosis that, in simplified form, the absence of Black fathers was largely the cause of persistent Black poverty.⁵² Armed with the latest social science, liberals cyclically rediscovered the problem of poverty and routinely blamed one-parent households and, particularly in the 1980s, the absent Black father.⁵³ Indeed, if the “welfare queen” was the primary rhetorical villain of 1970s welfare politics, by the 1980s she was joined or overtaken by the figure of the “deadbeat dad” whose libidinous irresponsibility cost dutiful taxpayers.⁵⁴

⁴⁹For state experiments, in a punitive welfare, Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); and as sites of experimental reform to liberalism, Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us*; David Osborne, *Laboratories of Democracy* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1988).

⁵⁰Clinton seemed to like the idea of a literal signed contract, a strategy deployed in some states like California. Clinton’s prepared remarks only referenced a “binding contractual agreement.” Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, US Congress, Senate, Committee on Finance: Hearings on Welfare Reform, part 1 of 3, 100th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 1987: 17, 21.

⁵¹Moynihan, Hearings on Welfare Reform, 33.

⁵²Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, March 1965).

⁵³On the social-scientific construction of the “broken family” see O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge; Chappell, War on Welfare*; Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare*; Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Ted Ownby, *Hurtin’ Words: Debating Family Problems in the Twentieth-Century South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

⁵⁴The absentee father has come in and out of focus as a primary public-policy problem and the object of sustained liberal ire. Ann Cammett, “Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens: How

At that 1987 Senate hearing on welfare, Governor Clinton testified that the contractual approach to reforming welfare required investments in technical infrastructure. “This contract,” he explained, “has to be enforced not only on the part of the recipient but on the part of the State, through a case-management system.”⁵⁵ Technological infrastructure, even more than a culture of responsibility or a new legal regime, would enforce a welfare contract. Clinton’s assumptions were shaped by the computerized IBM infrastructure already deployed in states including Arkansas. Governors believed that with the right technology, a local welfare office could track and record a person’s income, number of children, work history, welfare payments received, potential enrollment in a worker training program, and, when there was a child, former sexual partners.

Liberals saw in absent fathers not only a root cause of poverty, but also the appropriate source of funding to offset the state’s fiscal burdens for supporting mothers and children. As historian Marissa Chappell has shown, conservatives were not alone in pushing to hold fathers responsible, as liberal feminists also worked to “reprivatize the cost of childbearing.”⁵⁶ Noncustodial parents, in this vision, owed the state for supporting the custodial parent. For liberal welfare reformers, enforcing a strict regime of child support payments promised an efficient anti-poverty model that offset public costs with private dollars.⁵⁷ The arrangement depended on public-sector intervention and increased surveillance. Starting in 1975, Congress required AFDC applicants to assign their child support rights to the welfare administering agency. In contrast, for middle-class families, child support was a private arrangement. For families on welfare, networked computing made state welfare agencies a party to what were otherwise private marriage and alimony contracts. At the time, President Gerald Ford worried, as Moynihan remembered it, “about the unnecessary intrusion of the Federal Government into domestic relations.”⁵⁸ By the 1980s, liberals and mod-

Metaphor Shapes Poverty Law,” *Boston College Journal of Law and Social Justice* 34, no. 2 (2014): 233–66; Michael Willrich, “Home Slackers: Men, the State, and Welfare in Modern America,” *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (September 2000): 460; Jocelyn Elise Crowley, *Defiant Dads: Fathers’ Rights Activists in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Irwin Garfinkel et al., eds., *Fathers under Fire: The Revolution in Child Support Enforcement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001).

⁵⁵Clinton, *Hearings on Welfare Reform*, 17.

⁵⁶Chappell, *War on Welfare*, 173.

⁵⁷Brent Cebul, “Frugal Governance, Family Values, and the Intimate Roots of Neoliberalism,” in *Intimate States: Gender, Sexuality and Governance in Modern US History*, eds. Margot Canaday, Robert Self, and Nancy Cott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021): 325–36.

⁵⁸Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Family and Nation*, (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986): 180.

erates were eager to plunge ahead.

In the 1987 Senate committee hearing on welfare reform, alongside Clinton, Delaware governor Mike Castle, a moderate Republican, bragged of “extensive computer networking” that tracked parents across states. Think about a father who would “just get in a car” or “get on a boat in the outgoing tide,” said Castle.⁵⁹ Castle detailed how Delaware shared data with New Jersey. To find fathers, the Governors explained, states could also compare the names of parents with Department of Motor Vehicles records and labor data. They might find hidden income, which the state could then collect as part of its revised and expanded welfare “contract.”

Still, the narrative and operational logic of a contract could not get a bill passed without political salesmanship. As he championed the Family Support Act, Moynihan likely saw in Clinton a shared commitment to professionalized liberalism. But in Clinton, Moynihan must have recognized something the academic policymaker lacked: savvy political charisma rooted in glad-handing Southern politics. Clinton, an avatar of both another New South and a new generation of liberals, offered a model to national legislators. The Southern governor promised them a path through the thicket of racialized welfare politics, by committing to addressing poverty while blunting the contested politics of entitlements through technological and technocratic practices of pragmatic reform. While senators credited Moynihan’s diligence, it was Clinton who would get credit, even begrudgingly from Moynihan, for rallying bipartisan support for a welfare reform bill.⁶⁰ On the House side, co-sponsor Harold Ford Sr., the young Black congressman from Tennessee with an MBA from Howard University, even invited Clinton to mark up the bill.⁶¹

With Clinton’s support, Moynihan’s Family Support Act of 1988 became law in a short-lived moment of liberal consensus. The Act mandated that all states implement “comprehensive and statewide automated data processing and information retrieval systems” for child support enforcement and, crucially, committed the federal government to covering 90 percent of the costs of these systems.⁶² The act itself did not redirect the evolution of welfare in the United States so

⁵⁹Delaware governor Michael Castle, US Congress, Senate, Committee on Finance: Hearings on Welfare Reform, part 1 of 3, 100th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 1987: 27.

⁶⁰Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Miles to Go: A Personal History of Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996): 26–28.

⁶¹Clinton, *My Life*, 345.

⁶²Family Support Act of 1988, Public Law 100-485. U.S. Statutes at Large 102 (1988): 2351–52.

much as accelerate the state-level mechanisms that made the bill's programmatic goals possible. Through open-ended federal matching funds, the Family Support Act further incentivized case management technologies, interstate information sharing, and aggressive tools for child-support enforcement.

Technologies of Contract Enforcement

In 1991, incentivized by the Family Support Act's funding, Mississippi submitted a proposal to fully automate their child-support enforcement program. An expanding array of digital tools would enhance the state's ability to identify who owed child support and to collect those funds. The plan cost \$32 million for fifty-one months of hardware installation and software development.⁶³ Even with knowledgeable contractors repurposing code and federal funds, the promise of debt collection as an expanding source of revenue did not self-evidently justify the multimillion-dollar costs of new computing systems. Put another way, if the moral or contractual cases had adherents, the economic or fiscal case remained to be made. Mississippi officials claimed that their new system would increase revenue by automating the targeting and collection of child support cases. One internal tally promised \$32 million in "savings" from a child support system upgrade.⁶⁴ To at least one member of the Mississippi oversight board assessing these expenses, the figures did not add up. He scrawled the math in the margins of official assessments. If child support cost approximately \$2,400 per month per child, this funding could support 2,713 children for five years. Doubtful that there would be \$32 million of additional revenue or cost savings, he was "having a problem with the business case for this." His underlined conclusion was clear: "A computer is not going to collect child support."⁶⁵ But computers had, in fact, begun collecting child support in states across the country. In Mississippi child support payments collected by the state drastically increased from \$50 million in 1992, to \$84 million in 1995, and to \$104 million in 1996.⁶⁶

⁶³Ed Tucker, "Fax of Draft Strategic Master Plan with Comments," November 13, 1990: 6, series 1616: Policy and Planning Committee files, 1986–1994, box 6512, folder: Policy and Planning Committee 1991, MDAH.

⁶⁴Tucker, "Fax of Draft Strategic Master Plan with Comments," 15.

⁶⁵Tucker, "Fax of Draft Strategic Master Plan with Comments," 2.

⁶⁶Joint Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review, Evaluation of the Department of Human Services, Child Support Enforcement Division's Accountability Information Systems (Jackson: Mississippi Legislature, April 15, 1997), "Total Child Support Collection," FY2020, series 2740: Executive Directors' correspondence and files, box 33435, folder: Child Support—undistributed funds, MDAH.

With these technological tools, states worked to collect child support differently from other types of fines, fees, or recouped costs. Mississippi required employers to withhold income directly from payroll. Using techniques developed as for Social Security administration, employers garnished child support payments directly from the paychecks of employed parents. Additional subsystems from different states, which matched parental names against new-hire reports, automatically notified employers to remove funds from a paycheck. The Tax Offset Program allowed states to “intercept state and federal taxes from noncustodial parents delinquent in making their child support benefits.”⁶⁷ For poor families, this policy meant state or federal tax benefits, like the earned income tax benefit, could instead end up in state coffers.⁶⁸ Similarly, tax benefits intended to support food or housing could also be directly garnished to offset the cost of child support.

As more parents were identified who owed the state money, Mississippi automatically referred many noncustodial parents to child-support enforcement officers.⁶⁹ The system wasn’t perfectly efficient. Bulletins laid out the difficulties of reconciling collection data (child support payments received by the state) and public-assistance data (welfare funds distributed by the state) without the precision of a Social Security number. Instead, case workers might call the help desk in Jackson to ensure accounting was in order.⁷⁰ Such bureaucratic hacks allowed case workers to enter a summary of custody payments and record them as income even when the parent’s identifiers were uncertain.⁷¹

States implemented increasingly data-intensive tools to surveil and punish those who failed to pay, including seizing funds directly. By the late 1990s, the Financial Institution Data Match program relied on name-matching to compare the

⁶⁷“Division of Child Support Enforcement,” 2001, series 2740: Executive Directors’ correspondence and files, box: 33431, folder: MDHS’ Divisions Accomplishments, MDAH.

⁶⁸Patricia Whitley, “Memo to Russell Ferguson; Re: Programming Services for Department of Human Services,” February 10, 1994, series 160: Central Data Processing Authority Board minutes, box 6188, folder 146, MDAH.

⁶⁹Alsee McDaniel, “Memorandum to Janice Broome Brooks; Subject: Updates on Critical Issues,” December 27, 2000, series 2740: Executive Directors’ correspondence and files, box 33431, folder: MDHS Programmatic/Critical Issues, MDAH; Richard Harris and Edwin H. Henry, “Memorandum to County Directors; Subject: Child Support Clarifications,” January 23, 1998, series 2740: Executive Directors’ correspondence and files, box 33434, folder: Child Support Bulletins, MDAH.

⁷⁰Richard Harris, “Memorandum to County Directors; Subject: Procedures for Case Resolution and Treatment of Noncustodial Parents Referred without SSNs,” April 17, 1998, series 2740: Executive Directors’ correspondence and files, box 33434, folder: Child Support Bulletins, MDAH.

⁷¹Harris and Henry, “Memorandum to County Directors; Subject: Child Support Clarifications.”

names of noncustodial parents who had overdue child support payments with clients at all financial institutions (local and national banks) doing business in the state. To follow the computerized path: if, according to calculations from the case management system, welfare payments were distributed, and if the noncustodial parent as digitally documented had not paid the state, that parent's name was sent to their bank. That bank account might be frozen or funds automatically withdrawn. The minimum amount owed to trigger this process automatically was just \$250.⁷²

If no matches were found, or if the account held insufficient funds, the state used additional enforcement tools. Again, relying on name-matching, the noncustodial parent's information was sent to various state agencies, including the Mississippi Department of Public Safety which could suspend various state-issued licenses for failure to pay, or failure to comply with warrants to participate in paternity testing or child-support hearings. Not just drivers' licenses, but also those for hunting, fishing, and to operate a business.⁷³ Most consequentially, hundreds of Mississippians were briefly incarcerated for failure to pay or for compounding offenses like driving without a license suspended thanks to enforcement measures.⁷⁴ Technology helped the state become more adept at surveilling the poor and extracting payments with the threat of punishment. Interoperable computer systems championed by liberal reformers thus unified an increasingly extractive carceral state and an ostensibly beneficent welfare state.

From Contract to Covenant to Contract

In October 1991, as he launched his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton borrowed Moynihan's phrase for effective welfare administration. Rather than use

⁷²Alsee McDaniel, "Financial Institution Data Match Policy," November 30, 2000, series 2740: Executive Directors' correspondence and files, box 33434, folder: Child Support Bulletins, MDAH.

⁷³Alsee McDaniel, "License Suspension," April 6, 2000, series 2740: Executive Directors' correspondence and files, box 33434, folder: Child Support Bulletins, MDAH.

⁷⁴Kaaryn S. Gustafson, *Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Tonya L. Brito, "Fathers behind Bars: Rethinking Child Support Policy toward Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers and Their Families," *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, no. 3 (2012): 617–74; Amanda Geller, Irwin Garfinkel, and Bruce Western, "Paternal Incarceration and Support for Children in Fragile Families," *Demography* 48, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 25–47; Jessica Pearson, "Building Debt While Doing Time: Child Support and Incarceration," *Judges' Journal* 1 (2004): 4–11; Noah Zatz, "A New Peonage? Pay, Work, or Go to Jail in Contemporary Child Support Enforcement and Beyond," *Seattle Law Review* 39, no. 3 (February 2016): 927–55.

the more transactional language of a contract, Clinton offered the aspirational language of a “New Covenant.” This idea would become a central motif of his campaign—a promise to remake the relationship between citizen and state. A voter could hear that Clinton wanted to update and reform the New Deal compact, and a claim that Clinton was at once FDR’s heir and something fundamentally new. With “covenant” not “contract,” Clinton would not fully disenchant liberal citizenship with the language of the market, but he would sanctify it with technocratic reforms that promised less contestable means of distributing and funding social programs.

With the campaign’s first major policy address at Georgetown, his Jesuit alma mater, Clinton fleshed out his covenant. It was an attempt to preserve some core commitments of what voters called liberalism while expanding the Democrat’s electoral coalition. Clinton, the modernizing Arkansas Baptist, adopted the framing of Catholic social commitments associated with liberals like Ted Kennedy, Tip O’Neill, and Moynihan to sell policies that undermined those very commitments. Clinton’s New Covenant paradoxically promised both collectivity and individuality. “That’s what our hope is today: A New Covenant to shoulder our common load. When people assume responsibility and shoulder that common load, they acquire a dignity they never knew before.” That new dawn would come “when fathers pay their child support.” The state was defining, brokering, and enforcing these obligations technologically. No matter how powerful though, the New Covenant only truly mattered, Clinton reminded his audience, if it could help win elections. “This New Covenant can only be ratified by the people,” Clinton then specified, “in the 1992 election.”⁷⁵

By 1994, after the legislative failure of the Clinton administration’s health-care plan and limited administrative welfare reforms, Congressman Newt Gingrich responded with an alternative “contract.” The Republican Party’s *Contract with America* was a concise set of commitments, ten bills to pass if they took control of Congress. While the Clinton administration envisioned dramatic welfare reforms through its proposed Work and Responsibility Act, Gingrich outflanked Democrats with a straightforward repeal of AFDC through the Personal Responsibility Act. Moynihan was disgusted by both the Republican proposal and the Clinton administration’s capitulation. The Republican welfare reform plan, in Moynihan’s assessment, “would be the most regressive event in social pol-

⁷⁵Bill Clinton, “The New Covenant: Responsibility and Rebuilding the American Community,” speech, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, October 23, 1991.

icy of the 20th century.”⁷⁶ Following Gingrich’s sweeping success in the 1994 midterms and his elevation to Speaker of the House, Moynihan was frustrated by Clinton’s submission: “Determined to go along,” the Clinton administration developed a tactic where “Democrats would *demand* that Republicans add *a little* extra money for various services” but the core commitments to ongoing financial support would end.⁷⁷

Many, including Moynihan’s own staff, thought the senator should take responsibility for not only articulating a liberal position on welfare but also drafting a bill and whipping the necessary votes. Indeed, Moynihan’s aides were “baffled, even horrified” that their boss did not forcefully offer a liberal counter to Gingrich’s welfare reform taken up by Clinton.⁷⁸ For liberals aligned with Moynihan, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (the very name of the 1996 welfare law hybridized Clinton’s and Gingrich’s proposals) was a fundamental rupture from the sorts of incremental reforms in the Family Support Act of 1988. Lawrence O’Donnell Jr., Moynihan’s committee staff leader, was shocked by the pace at which welfare was gutted. O’Donnell told the *Washington Post*, “Very little has changed in our knowledge about what to do to help the welfare population. The only thing that’s changed is our politics.”⁷⁹

By 1996, the Clinton and Moynihan camps agreed on very little, except that the problem was politics. The technical success of welfare administration systems had not neutralized the conservative political power of attacking welfare. By signing a bill that transformed the national welfare system into state block grants, Clinton ended “welfare as we know it.” As part of the package, he promised “the most sweeping crackdown on deadbeat parents in history.”⁸⁰ Many of the operational and even legislative tools for that crackdown, nevertheless, were already in place with interoperable databases humming along and state agencies garnishing paychecks. Indeed, both Clinton and Moynihan had been instrumental in ensuring that child support enforcement had grown, as Libby Adler and Janet Halley note, “from a feeble and disconnected array of judicial orders into a nationalized, computerized, and (at least for wage earners) nearly

⁷⁶Barbara Vobejda, “The Debates over Welfare,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 1995.

⁷⁷Moynihan, *Miles to Go*, 34.

⁷⁸Moynihan addresses these critics at lengths in *Miles to Go*, 26–63.

⁷⁹Vobejda, “The Debates Over Welfare.”

⁸⁰President William Jefferson Clinton, “Remarks on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and an Exchange with Reporters,” in *Public Papers of the President of the United States: Administration of William J. Clinton*, bk. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996): 1329.

seamless collection apparatus.”⁸¹ The former governor surely knew that “nearly seamless” extraction was a technological accomplishment—not a bug but feature.

In the White House Rose Garden for the bill signing, in the full swing of his 1996 reelection campaign, President Clinton promised an end to the politics of welfare. “Welfare will no longer be a political issue. The two parties cannot attack each other over it. Politicians cannot attack poor people over it.” The press followed up, asking if the president had not betrayed core constituents of the liberal coalition. Clinton promised to closely monitor the implementation and fix whatever glitches arose. One reporter pushed further: “What guarantees are there that these things will be fixed, Mr. President, especially if Republicans remain in control of Congress?” Clinton responded crisply: “That’s what we have elections for.”⁸²

⁸¹Adler and Halley, “‘You Play, You Pay,’” 288.

⁸²Clinton, “Remarks on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,” 1330.