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The Right to Starve

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It was during the Great Depression—I was 11 and already immersed in jazz. I had smuggled the family radio in my bedroom so I could hear the jazz remotes on the net-works. From Chicago that night, Fats Waller was playing the plush Palmer Room. The announcer described the shining audience—eating and drinking with gusto.

Then Fats came to the microphone. With the sounds of merriment in the background he said, "I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight."

I got to know him later, and I'm sure that message was for anyone poor who still had a radio and might be listening. At least somebody was thinking of them. Back in Boston, my family was poor, and a few months later, the installment-plan man came to take our radio.

I've been thinking of that voice of warmth in the night as the dark waves of "reform" batter more and more of the poor around the country. For example, a Republican bill in Congress would ban unmarried women who give birth before their 18th birthday from receiving benefits for life.

The president, meanwhile, talks primarily of tax breaks for the middle class. Hardly

anyone in power speaks for the poor anymore. Fats Waller has long been gone.

For years, certain civil libertarians have urged a constitutional right to a decent income. I have resisted this concept as pie-in-the-sky constitutional law. But now, I am beginning to wonder.

In Arkansas, Georgia, New Jersey and Massachusetts, if a mother, while on welfare, bears a child, there will be no benefits for that child. The

SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY

same provision is in the Clinton welfare reform plan, as an option the states can implement. In the Republican plan, it is mandatory. Is this the vaunted American way? Punishing children for being born to parents on welfare?

In New York State, the new governor, George Pataki—an amiable man—does not see the poor as individuals but only as a large, abstract abattoss on the state's budget. Part of his grand reform design will lead to cutting aid to the disabled and the elderly, and loss of clinical care for the mentally ill.

Moreover, under Pataki's Home Relief program, allegedly employable recipients of welfare can get benefits for only 90 days in

any year. Then they are on their own. In the New York Times, Bob Herbert quotes Anne Erickson of the Greater Upstate Law Project:

"Where are they going to go? Does Pataki have jobs for them? Is he going to create jobs for them? I'll tell you where they're going to go. They're going to end up in the shelters, and in the public hospitals emergency rooms, and in the street."

A reporter from Newsday went to a Red

Cross homeless-family shelter in New York and talked to 21 year-old Valerie Marville. She has a 15-month-old son and no job. Her annual income—before the looming cuts, city, state and federal—is \$5,856 in Aid to Families With Dependent Children and \$2,544 in food stamps. She says: "Every time you have a new administration, everything just changes—and never for the better. It's putting us through hell. We don't know if we're going to the right or to the left or back or forth."

Meanwhile, George Pataki sounds like some of the Pecksniffian citizens—moralizing over their succulent Sunday dinners—in

the novels of Charles Dickens. Says Pa "Welfare is meant to be temporary! Instead it has become a trap for too many. Yes, it has. But there are grimmer things we're talking," says Mary Bronsahan of Coalition for the Homeless, "about three people off a financial cliff." But they will free to fall.

Those who are cut off welfare, it should be noted, also lose their eligibility for Medicaid. Meanwhile, a soup kitchen in Central New York knows it will have to close soon former clients, however, will learn to independent—they can make their own way out of what they find in garbage cans.

Those who control the legislative process state and federal, are indeed setting a Contract With America. But hardly with America.

A new Columbia University School of Public Health study discloses that a majority of the 6 million poor children who are younger had parents who—during the 1990 period of the study—worked full-time part-time. And many of those families have rely, in part, on public assistance.

Is what Michael Harrington called "other America" going to be wholly beyond the reach of due process?