

The Work Ethic

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President Nixon has sought to make a campaign issue out of his defense of "the work ethic" that he says "built this nation's character," while implying that Senator McGovern upholds something called "the new welfare ethic" that would destroy the national character.

Mr. Nixon is thus using the "work ethic" issue—or nonissue—as he has the school busing issue: as a device for appealing to the emotions and even the bigotry of millions of people who work for a living and who are prepared to believe that those who do not are shiftless, lazy and inferior.

But, besides being a carefully coded insult, Mr. Nixon's effort to exploit the decline of the "work ethic" is based on a myth. A careful social-psychological study, "Do the Poor Want to Work?," by Leonard Goodwin of the Brookings Institution, has discovered that reality differs sharply from the stereotyped view of the poor. Based on interviews with a large sample of workers, black and white, male and female, young and adult, both working and jobless, the Goodwin study concludes that welfare recipients, whatever their race or time spent on welfare, have essentially the same work ethic and life aspirations as do employed middle-class people.

Teen-age welfare boys from fatherless homes, strikingly enough, demonstrate a strong work ethic even though they have been on welfare almost their entire lives. The widespread belief that welfare weakens the work ethic of young men, the study shows, is untrue.

But the study did find that black persons are much less confident in their ability to succeed at work than are whites and that those people out of work or on welfare with the strongest work ethic showed the greatest lack of confidence of all. This implies that those who most closely identify their self-esteem with work suffer the most severe stress when they fail. As George Orwell once wrote of those who most wanted work and could not find it, they are "haunted by a feeling of personal degradation."

The way to cure such degradation is not to preach sermons about "the work ethic" but to help people get jobs. An Administration that has presided over a rise in the unemployment rolls by two million and a rise in the welfare rolls of five million cannot slough off its responsibilities by seeking to shift the blame to the victims of unemployment and poverty. What is needed to safeguard "the work ethic" are an economic policy to create more jobs and a social policy to eliminate racial discrimination.

Increasing the social stigma attached to joblessness and existence on welfare, as Mr. Nixon is doing, only serves to increase psychological attitudes of dependence, lengthen the welfare rolls and discourage the further work efforts of those who feel themselves degraded and despised.