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Paul Ryan's 'hammock'

Joe Ferullo | Apr. 7, 2011 NCR Today

The latest GOP take on the federal budget has come very close to reviving a golden oldie of hot-button politics -- the mythical and powerful "welfare queen."

A lot of the poisonous politics of the 70s and 80s revolved around the nation's programs for the poor. Instituted as part of "The Great Society" in the mid-1960s, these programs had -- ten years later -- become rife with abuse for which hard-working taxpayers were footing the bill.

On the back of that resentment rode a generation of politicians who derided the legendary "welfare queen." She was the supposedly poor mother from a place like Harlem who actually worked the system for huge amounts of cash: she had children just to collect checks, she drove Cadillacs while getting taxpayer transportation subsidies, and got money for "job training" programs she never attended.

The Queen -- imagined or real (and some were real: some) -- seemed to have faded away with Bill Clinton's welfare reform in the 1990s.

But no: her majesty has been nearly brought back to life by a man pundits consider among the most sober and creative thinkers on the right: Rep. Paul Ryan.

In presenting his plan to end the federal deficit, Ryan called for reducing the top tax rate from 35 to 25 percent -- while achieving huge savings through severe cutbacks on aid to the poor. He calls this merely an extension of Clinton's welfare reform.

This is a morally good thing, Ryan insists, because his budget plan ?extends those successes (of the 90s) .?.?. to ensure that America?s safety net does not become a hammock that lulls able-bodied citizens into lives of complacency and dependency.?

A hammock? Aid to the poor is now a hammock. Dress it up a bit with velvet and gold trim, and, why, it could look like a throne. For a queen. A welfare queen.

As Ruth Marcus points out in *The Washington Post* [1], this is one very flimsy hammock: the average household on food stamps get a bit more than four dollars a day in aid; no childress adult in America now gets any kind of help with healthcare; etc.

Whatever images we once had of the poor dancing in ballrooms of luxury while the working people sweated to pay their taxes -- those images are outdated. Those hot buttons have long gone cold. But old resentments die hard -- these days especially on the right. (Look in the dictionary under "Party, Tea.")

So the welfare queen is dead -- but for the hard right to score points, they need to shout: "Long live the Queen!"

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/rep-paul-ryan-has-it-wrong-on-the-safety-net/2011/03/04/AFzoROwC_blog.html