

he so often did, *lost* cases. Detlefsen, though, thinks he's found another explanation for the Reagan administration's failure. The culprit: a doctrinaire, liberal "civil rights ideology" that runs Washington.

To be generous, there is some truth in this neoconservative broadside. There are a lot of liberals, and even Republicans, in positions of power who reflexively support anything called "civil rights"—even when it goes far beyond nondiscrimination to include dubious policies like racial preferences for Asian-Indians. But if the Reagan administration fell on its face, don't blame some liberal bogymen. After all, the Reagan administration steamrolled liberals on everything from defense spending to deregulation. No, it failed on civil rights because even people who are wary of affirmative action couldn't trust this administration to do the right thing. Never did it offer the necessary reassurance that it really cared about the plight of minorities.

Color-blind antipoverty programs were cut; black leaders were shunned. The Jack Kemp-style conservative empowerment agenda, with its enter-

prise zones and housing vouchers, might have provided some limited benefit to minorities and political benefit to an administration said to be lacking compassion. But those novel ideas failed to receive sufficient backing from the likes of Sam Pierce and wound up largely moribund. Little wonder, then, that when the Reagan crew talked "color-blind," many heard a less benign message: "Get the blacks."

Reagan had a chance to build credibility when he appointed men and women with impeccable civil rights credentials, like my friend Civil Rights Commissioner Morris Abram, a Democrat who, among other noble deeds, served as Martin Luther King Jr.'s lawyer and chaired the United Negro College Fund. But his presence, and that of others, was often overshadowed by a cast of characters, like Ed Meese, who managed to be at once buffoonish and mean-spirited. Detlefsen seems not to consider this. In fact, he all but applauds the take-no-prisoners style of one of the administration's greater embarrassments, Clarence Pendleton, the late Civil Rights Commission chairman.

For those of us who worked at the commission during the eighties, the Pendleton we knew was an instantly likable, sweet, and generous fellow. But in front of a microphone he could be a real curmudgeon. Yet Detlefsen, who relies heavily on secondary sources instead of real-life interviews, elevates the black Republican into a savvy politico capable of great thoughts and great oration. When Pendleton made his notorious remark likening affirmative action to a "plantation," he was, swoons Detlefsen, "acting on his belief that as a prerequisite to persuading ordinary blacks to abandon the politics of racial preference, he would first need to discredit the icons in whom that idea was embodied." Such gruffness, Detlefsen says, was an "idiom" that "ordinary blacks" understood. Detlefsen's account is not only patronizing but wrong. Pendleton's likening of civil rights leaders not to mistaken comrades in a shared struggle but to "charlatans" was widely seen as pigheaded by both blacks and whites (be they ordinary or extraordinary).

Detlefsen is probably right that affirmative action and a whole host of

race-conscious policies are woven into the country's politics. The only chance for reform, he suggests, is the Rehnquist Court. Perhaps. But it's possible, too, that the excesses of affirmative action—such as set-asides for wealthy Cubans or lower college admissions standards, which do minorities no service—could be curbed politically, through legislation, regulation, and a bully pulpit. But it would take a very different kind of president than Ronald Reagan. Reevaluating affirmative action requires a leader who will challenge civil rights orthodoxy and display an equally fierce commitment to alleviating poverty. A president who did that might also begin to heal the racial fractures that divide the country. He or she could begin to assemble the great populist coalition of blacks and whites that is the stuff of Democratic dreams. Come to think of it, a president who did all that would be pretty terrific.

—Matthew Cooper

A Street Is Not a Home: Solving America's Homeless Dilemma.

Robert C. Coates. *Prometheus Books, \$14.95.* Robert Coates, an energetic San Diego municipal court judge, wants everyone to know that the homeless problem can be solved. His new book, *A Street is Not a Home*, could prove to be the most comprehensive, well-read entry in a burgeoning literature on how to help the homeless, since the author—with the aid of a foundation grant—has arranged to send copies to 9,000 policymakers, including every U.S. senator and congressman and every city manager in the country. Ultimately, though, Coates's treatise may do little to help public officials, despite its considerable common sense and massive underpinning of research. He has done a commendable job of distilling examples of model programs that successfully help the homeless. But he has done a poor job of explaining why the overall homeless aid system continues to fail, even in the face of a mountain of research that has shown for several years how it should be reformed.

Coates's prescription for helping the homeless—throw everything but the kitchen sink at them—is better than it sounds. In the judge's view, there isn't "one solution" to homelessness

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because those living in the streets and shelters are a diverse, alienated, troubled, and extremely impoverished group. As Coates reports, about a third of urban homeless adults are severely mentally ill, another third are alcohol or drug abusers, and about 1 in 10 are ex-convicts.

His numbers on ex-convicts and substance abusers are actually on the low side, but they all go toward making the same point: The homeless need more than roofs over their heads or cheap apartments to right their lives. For without social services, rehabilitation, monitoring, and counseling, homeless adults often recycle back to the shelters and the streets. To his credit, Coates generally does not whitewash the homeless by presenting them as modern-day Okies. Nor does he mealy-mouth the need to tighten commitment laws, which now protect the "rights" of deranged, delusional Americans to live out of garbage cans and street gutters for years on end.

Instead, he contends that rehabilitation and social services should be tailored to reflect different homeless subpopulations. A homeless drunk, he suggests, often requires detoxification, AA meetings, lessons in personal hygiene, help in finding a job, and perhaps a transitional stay in an alcohol-free halfway house. By contrast, homeless women with children may need day care, counseling about abusive boyfriends, and practice opening a bank account or balancing a checkbook.

Coates's prescription for multifaceted support services would substantially alter the existing shelter regimen, now sometimes referred to by homeless advocates as the "three hots and a cot" system and known in the old days, when religious missions dominated skid row, as the "soup and salvation" method. In fact, most shelters still do little more than warehouse the homeless—fewer than a third of all urban shelters provide any treatment for substance abuse or mental illness, and just as few offer health care.

Still, Coates's prescription is too muddle-headed, mostly because he fails to recognize that even good solutions to homelessness are not all created equal. In one numbing chapter, he enumerates in nine pages 30 successful strategies for preserving affordable

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housing, ranging from tax credits for low-income housing to lobbying Congress about the S&L bailout. Elsewhere his indiscriminate approach gives short shrift to important reform efforts.

Most important, Coates's undifferentiated approach fails to emphasize that there are mistaken antidotes to the homeless crisis, too. Regrettably, he spends little time telling officials what they should *not* do. That shortcoming is critical, because when it comes to homeless assistance programs, public officials and nonprofit institutions continually reinvent a square wheel. Most cities now rely on the wrong approach: a poorly coordinated system of spartan shelters with social services often located crosstown.

Coates does in passing offer some insight into why homeless aid programs go awry. Staff burnout is one common problem; the Not-In-My-Backyard syndrome is another. But his advice about how to combat the NIMBY syndrome can be remarkably bloodless ("politicians and government need to take bold steps and stand

up for unpopular programs") as is his analysis of the local fears that undergird it ("the leading citizen concern is for lack of street parking").

He is especially reluctant to criticize homeless advocates, much less suggest that the behavior of the homeless themselves may contribute to the mess. Yet homeless advocates have often exacerbated existing flaws in the homeless aid system by promoting right-to-shelter laws. In New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, such requirements actually helped spur an explosion of homelessness in the latter half of the 1980s, especially among families. By creating a homelessness entitlement program, however paltry, homeless advocates implicitly encouraged thousands of struggling single mothers who were unhappily doubled up with friends, relatives, or boy-friends to head for shelters. Many of these impoverished women knew that a stay in a shelter would jump them to the top of a multiyear waiting list for inexpensive public housing. To meet court-enforced mandates to shelter everyone, overwhelmed staff typically

cut back social and rehabilitative services and stuffed overflow families into armories and seedy welfare hotels.

Coates ultimately shrinks from the unpleasant truth that the homeless themselves must be part of any solution. It is not enough merely to provide counseling and services to the homeless; every shelter resident except the severely mentally ill should be immediately required to take gradual steps toward becoming more self-sufficient. One of the ironies of Coates's book is that he fails to explicitly ask more of the homeless while he continually praises initiatives that forbid clients to use drugs or alcohol, carry weapons or fight, and that often require the homeless to work and to adhere to meticulous progress plans.

Coates does present one powerful counterargument to the nearsightedness of the current system. As he notes, the Band-Aid approach to helping the homeless only *seems* cheaper than his reform alternative because the costs of homelessness to the taxpayer are largely hidden. The extra cot in the rectory basement sounds inexpensive, but only when the other costs of homelessness—including vandalism, foster care for kids, revolving-door detox for chronic alcoholics, emergency welfare assistance for homeless families, and juvenile detention for homeless runaways—are ignored. One example of a price tag the taxpayer rarely sees: the San Diego police spend about \$300,000 a year to lock up 90 chronic alcoholics—each of whom gets arrested an average of seven times a month.

—David Whitman

The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite. James Allen Smith. *Free Press*, \$24.95. **Talking Heads: A Look at the Popular and Influential News Commentators.** Alan Hirsch. *St. Martin's*, \$17.95. When Vaclav Havel appeared before a joint session of Congress last winter to argue the Hegelian point that consciousness precedes being—not the other way around as Karl Marx had posited—he sent many patriotic and politically inspired Americans into a deep depression. How is it, Americans asked themselves, that the Czechs managed to elect this exquisitely brave and eloquent intellectual as their president on their very first

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