


ARTICLE

# “Saints” or “Scabs”: Contesting Feminized Labors, Social Needs, and the Welfare State in the Volunteering Wars of the 1970s

Katherine Turk 

*The fate of caring labor was up for grabs in the 1970s, when Americans debated how to value feminized work—paid or unpaid, professional or service-oriented, performed in one’s own home or beyond it—as women’s social roles shifted. President Richard Nixon and his allies proposed reassigning caregiving functions to volunteers as a way to resist new demands on the welfare state and shrug off unmet social needs. Although many women’s groups objected, their varied approaches to feminized labors also kept them from forging a united response. Recovering these volunteering wars offers up a vital perspective on the conflict between postwar movements advancing broad rights claims and the New Right’s frontal assault on the “undeserving.” Manipulating notions of benevolence, Nixon and his associates found new ways to puncture the social safety net—a process that political leaders from both major parties would emulate and accelerate.*

“We are approaching the limits of what government can do,” claimed Richard Nixon in his 1969 presidential inaugural address. “Our greatest need now is to reach beyond government, to enlist the legions of the concerned and the committed.”<sup>1</sup> Americans’ needs for social services had not diminished, he asserted, but generous citizens could step in as volunteers to perform the caring labor that the state left behind. In Nixon’s ambitious vision, housewives could shop and cook for the elderly, the elderly could act as surrogate grandparents for children of single parents, students could tutor their younger peers, and more. “The goal,” explained a Nixon advisor, was “near-universal individual involvement in helping to solve the nation’s pressing social problems.”<sup>2</sup>

Once in office, Nixon began a new federal initiative: the National Center for Voluntary Action (NCVA), a hybrid government agency and nonprofit that aimed to attract more Americans to the unpaid work of benevolence. Established in 1970, the NCVA soon had outposts in 32 communities and plans for 300 more.<sup>3</sup> NCVA volunteers supervised tots at daycare centers, mentored troubled kids, prepared food for the disabled and the elderly, and comforted the sick—all feminized tasks that a woman might once have been expected to take on either in her own home or in someone else’s for meager pay.<sup>4</sup> The Center’s slogan (“You’ve got something money can’t buy—we need you”) framed volunteering to meet others’ needs as valuable

---

Thanks to Felice Batlan, Robin Bernstein, Mary Anne Case, Corinne T. Field, Tanisha C. Ford, Erik S. Gellman, Dana Sajdi, Laura M. Weinrib, the Regulation of Family, Sex and Gender Workshop at the University of Chicago Law School; and to *Modern American History*’s anonymous reviewers and editors.

<sup>1</sup>Richard M. Nixon, “Inaugural Address,” *Congressional Record*, 91 Cong., 1 sess., Jan. 20, 1969, 1291.

<sup>2</sup>Alan L. Otten, “Call for Volunteers: Nixon Plans to Foster Private-Group Attacks on Big Social Problems,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 21, 1969, 1.

<sup>3</sup>“Voluntary Action Centers Described by Henry Ford,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, Oct. 16, 1971, 9A.

<sup>4</sup>David R. Maxey, “The Volunteers,” *Look*, June 16, 1970, 17–8.

but priceless.<sup>5</sup> Its heart-shaped logo suggested that such caring labor was supposed to fill the soul, not the wallet.

Many women's groups met Nixon's campaign with alarm. Leading the critics was the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW defined women's volunteering as rooted in outmoded gender stereotypes and exclusion from equal participation in the paid labor force. Reflecting its membership of predominantly white wage earners, NOW accused the president of devaluing feminized caring labors by urging volunteers to see themselves as "saints" instead of "scabs" depriving someone else—a woman, most likely—of a paycheck.<sup>6</sup> Employers should open male-dominated jobs to women and raise the wages of feminized jobs, NOW argued, rather than "compassion-trap[ping]" women into working for free as volunteers.<sup>7</sup> And women should be able earn enough money as workers to allow them to support themselves and their families. NOW's premise seemed simple—valuable efforts should be paid—but its advocacy stirred up vexing questions.

These were the opening salvos in the volunteering wars of the 1970s, which recast older disputes about women's social roles and the provision of social needs. Women had historically met those needs through their unwaged caregiving in their own homes, volunteering beyond their homes, and working in government-funded jobs that supported the elderly, the disabled, and children. Economic and political shifts in the 1970s ruptured these arrangements and made unpaid feminized efforts a flashpoint in a heated controversy. Americans debated: was volunteering to meet social needs a benign way to extend one's generosity in exchange for personal fulfillment, a crucial route into the workforce, a balm for a divided nation, or a potentially exploitative yet essential gap-filler for underfunded institutions?<sup>8</sup>

The crux of the volunteering dispute was how to value feminized labor—paid or unpaid, performed in one's home or outside of it, professional or service-oriented—as women's social roles shifted. The male breadwinner ideal, which held that men's wages should keep dependent wives and children out of the labor market, was always implausible for many. But that family structure became impossible for most as the cost of living climbed in the 1960s. Women, especially whites, poured into service, clerical, and manufacturing jobs, where they joined many women of color and faced discrimination and low earnings. Those wage earners could no longer attend full time to the oldest and youngest members of their own families, sparking a new crisis of care. Nor could they contribute as many unpaid hours to their communities. Female-headed households became more common as divorce laws loosened. And when a series of economic shocks in the early 1970s sparked a recession and crushed the blue-collar sector, prices surged and wages stagnated. With the collapse of the breadwinner-homemaker system, who would handle the feminized work of caring for the young, the sick, and the elderly—and for what compensation?<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Nicholas von Hoffman, "Voluntarism—More or Less," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 4, 1972, 26.

<sup>6</sup>"Volunteer: Why Not? Analysis and Answers," undated, 10, folder 7, box 328, Additional Records of the National Organization for Women (MC 666), Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, MA [hereafter ARN].

<sup>7</sup>Mary Stoll, "Feminist Thinks Volunteerism Is a 'Compassion Trap'," *Knickerbocker News*, Oct. 18, 1974, clipping, folder 13, box 31, Records of the National Organization for Women (MC 496), Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, MA [hereafter RON].

<sup>8</sup>Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge, UK, 1994); Jeanne Boydston, *Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (Oxford, UK, 1994); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford, UK, 2001); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, UK, 1998); Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

<sup>9</sup>Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900–1995* (College Station, TX, 1997), 177, 196, 203; Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*

Caring labor's fate was thus up for grabs in the 1970s. Nixon and his allies proposed assigning it to volunteers as a method of resisting new demands on the welfare state and shrugging off unmet social needs. They suggested that women should keep caregiving in their homes and even retake more of that burden from the state, despite their increased wage earning. This campaign exposed the lack of consensus among women and their advocates while deepening their fissures. NOW was the most outspoken opponent of the new push to volunteer. That organization's demand for more pay for feminized caring labor aligned it with activists for welfare rights and wages for housework, but those groups fought to focus the debate on the value of those labors inside women's own homes. Black women's associations took a pragmatic approach to volunteering in light of their long tradition of racial uplift. Without Black women's volunteer efforts, they explained, many necessities would remain unaddressed. Established service groups like the Junior League similarly defined volunteering as a community service as well as a legitimate choice. While members of women's political auxiliaries agreed, they sought not pay but more power for volunteers to steer their parties. The volunteering question laid bare the enormous range of feminized labors while offering advocates nothing to help align their varied efforts to revalue and reassign it.<sup>10</sup>

Recovering the volunteering wars of the 1970s, which reveals new connections among streams of scholarship on welfare, labor, feminism and conservatism, thus offers up a vital perspective on the conflict between postwar movements advancing broad rights claims and the New Right's frontal assault on the "undeserving poor."<sup>11</sup> Historians have argued that feminist efforts to reset the terms of work and reassign its value foundered on the shoals of employer resistance, conservative appeals to breadwinners' prerogatives, and a sputtering economy. But no one has yet explored how the practice and rhetoric of volunteerism propelled this debate and steered its outcome by hamstringing some actors and emboldening others.

In this "pivotal decade" in American capitalism, a new wave of previously excluded workers sought good jobs, fair treatment, and union cards.<sup>12</sup> Welfare recipients demanded ample benefits and a hand in making welfare policy.<sup>13</sup> Some feminists aspired to equal treatment; others insisted upon radical transformation.<sup>14</sup> Conservatives could not yet defeat, through outright

---

(New York, 2012); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford, UK, 1982); Alison Lefkowitz, *Strange Bedfellows: Marriage in the Age of Women's Liberation* (Philadelphia, 2018); Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), especially 180, 193; Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York, 2013); Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT, 2011); Katherine Turk, *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern American Workplace* (Philadelphia, 2016); Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Cambridge, MA, 2021); Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

<sup>10</sup>Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston, 2020); Martha Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* (New York, 2020); Allison M. Parker, *Unceasing Militant: The Life of Mary Church Terrell* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020); Jennifer Scanlon, *Until There Is Justice: The Life of Anna Arnold Hedgeman* (Oxford, UK, 2016); Rebecca Tuuri, *Strategic Sisterhood: The National Council of Negro Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018). On mid-twentieth-century feminism and economic justice, see Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (New York, 2006); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2004); Turk, *Equality on Trial*; and Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Appalachian Women Led Movements for Social Justice* (Urbana, IL, 2018).

<sup>11</sup>Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty* (New York, 1989).

<sup>12</sup>Stein, *Pivotal Decade*; Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*.

<sup>13</sup>Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2007); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York, 2005).

<sup>14</sup>On this dynamic, see, for example, Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York, 2004); and Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present* (New York, 2009).

resistance, the pressure from all of those fronts to democratize a tightening economy and extend full economic citizenship beyond the idealized white male breadwinner. But neither could their opponents forge a united response. By manipulating the language and practice of benevolence, Nixon and his allies found a new angle from which to tear holes in the social safety net. After all, who could spurn that selfless soul who sought to help someone else for free?

The 1970s struggle over unwaged feminized labors had deep historical roots. The United States has long been a land of joiners. In the nineteenth century, women and men built local and national voluntary membership organizations that were cross-class but typically race- and sex-specific. Social custom assigned different forms of volunteering to the sexes, with women's framed as an extension of the private sphere and men's as contributing to commerce and politics. But even as men joined political parties, labor unions, and fraternal and veterans' groups, women activists leveraged notions of domesticity to gain their own kind of political influence. In their reform efforts, grounded in gendered notions of morality, women worked through their own associations and religious institutions to crusade against child labor, slavery, alcohol, sex work, and more. This advocacy offered women unpaid opportunities to shape national issues while building their reputations, organizational skills, and political education.<sup>15</sup>

Despite their economic exclusion, some women did begin to carve out a narrow "female dominion" within the ranks of paid professionals at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Using "maternalist" strategies, they worked to turn the values associated with motherhood—morality, care, and nurturing—from a private obligation into public policy.<sup>17</sup> Their efforts expanded some feminized tasks into new female-dominated professions. One such field was social work, carved out by a cohort who defined and professionalized the field in the 1920s and 1930s by distinguishing it from activities once performed by well-heeled volunteers and wedging themselves between agency funders and directors and the clients they served.<sup>18</sup>

For those women who continued to volunteer in the first few decades of the twentieth century, their very lack of a wage justified their authority in these relatively prominent roles. Volunteering offered a sense of purpose, a platform for civic engagement, a site to practice one's religious faith, and "an alternative career ladder."<sup>19</sup> Black clubwomen formed organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), sororities, and church-based associations that protested lynching and political exclusion while fundraising and providing direct services to the poor. Working-class women also helped to shape trade

<sup>15</sup>Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK, 2003), 71–2, 124; Susan J. Ellis and Katherine H. Noyes, *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers* (San Francisco, 1990), 10–1; Annette K. Baxter, Preface to *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914*, by Karen Blair (New York, 1980), xi–xv, here xi–xii; Paula Baker, *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life: Gender, Politics and the State in Rural New York, 1870–1930* (Oxford, UK, 1991), xv; Karen Bojar, "Volunteerism and Women's Lives: A Lens for Exploring Conflicts in Contemporary Feminist Thought, Historical Importance and Socioeconomic Value of Women's Contributions as Volunteers," in *Women's Studies in Transition: The Pursuit of Interdisciplinarity*, eds. Kate Conway-Turner, Suzanne Cherrin, Jessica Schiffman, and Kathleen Doherty Turkel (Newark, DE, 1998), 36–56, here 45; Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, CT, 1981); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19th-Century United States* (New Haven, CT, 1990), 5–8; Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana, IL, 1991), 81; Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 78.

<sup>16</sup>Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (Oxford, UK, 1991).

<sup>17</sup>Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Introduction: Mother Worlds," in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, eds. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York, 1993), 1–42, here 2–5.

<sup>18</sup>Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 14.

<sup>19</sup>Bojar, "Volunteerism and Women's Lives," 36.

union movements. For elites, groups like the Junior League placed their class status on conspicuous display.<sup>20</sup> To “educated young people,” as the theorist and activist Jane Addams had written in 1893, volunteering could give “tangible expression to the democratic ideal”; it enriched the helper as much as the helped.<sup>21</sup>

The work of social uplift may have benefitted both the helper and the helped, but it also reinforced their differences.<sup>22</sup> White middle-class women claimed power by asserting authority over others. Declaring raced and gendered expertise, they worked alongside male reformers to drive Progressive era reforms to clean up the social problems caused by immigration and poverty. These efforts did not win women major policy making roles, and the gendered, racialized American welfare state born in the 1930s shored up white men’s supremacy. And although the men who headed the Republican Party increasingly counted on allied women’s organizing and fundraising, seeking to rival the Democrats’ union-driven grassroots efforts, they gave GOP women little control to steer the party. Women volunteered amid the nationalist fervor of World War II in forms ranging from setting up local draft boards to entertaining soldiers at nearby military bases; teenagers joined the Victory Corps, which held parades, war bond sales, and scrap drives. All of them sought to evince their patriotism and express their gratitude to the men drafted overseas. Whether waged or not, women’s range of uplift efforts gave them some influence while reproducing inequalities of gender, race, and class.<sup>23</sup>

Social welfare-related government spending ballooned in the 1960s, when political leaders also redefined volunteering as a civic act. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, concerned about poverty and urban uprisings, set out to elevate volunteering while converting many feminized tasks into waged jobs, funded by the government. Kennedy ushered in federal initiatives such as Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and the Peace Corps, whose volunteers received a modest stipend to attend to social needs at home or overseas. Johnson expanded these programs and shepherded the construction of a vast network of social service agencies devoted to bottom-up change to benefit the nation’s poorest as part of his War on Poverty initiative. In 1964 alone, the Economic Opportunity Act channeled nearly \$1 billion to more than 1,000 community service agencies. These programs offered paid community roles in adult education, job training for young people and adults, rural and urban economic

<sup>20</sup>Scott, *Natural Allies*, 180; Marilyn Gittell and Teresa Shtob, “Changing Women’s Roles in Political Volunteerism and Reform of the City,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980): S67–78, here S67; Ellis and Noyes, *By the People*, 10; Baxter, Preface to *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, xi–xii; Berry and Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States*, 108–9; Floris Loretta Barnett Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896–1936* (Westport, CT, 2001), 4, 10; Jones, *Vanguard*; Anne Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women’s Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York, 1996); Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001).

<sup>21</sup>Jane Addams, “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” in *Philanthropy and Social Progress: Seven Essays* (Boston, 1893), 1–26, here 6. <AQ>Author: For reference 21, is there an editor for the volume?

<sup>22</sup>The literature on women’s reform efforts and associations in the twentieth century is vast. A sampling includes Melissa Estes Blair, *Revolutionizing Expectations: Women’s Organizations, Feminism, and American Politics, 1965–1980* (Athens, GA, 2014); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston, 1870–1940* (Oxford, UK, 2000); Maureen A. Flanagan, *Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871–1933* (Princeton, NJ, 2002); and Landon Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers’ League, Women’s Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

<sup>23</sup>Kathryn Kish Sklar, “The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830–1930,” in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, eds. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York, 1993), 43–92, here 51; Self, *All in the Family*, 10; Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ, 1990), 19–21, 55; Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*; Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage Through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 4; Susan J. Ellis and Katherine H. Campbell, *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, 2005), 210–2.

development, legal aid, and more. Black women sought to fill racialized gaps in the New Deal, whose programs restricted entitlements based on race. Women—especially women of color—laid claim to public resources as recipients and workers in this community-driven bureaucracy, even as they faced discrimination in how government programs were defined and administered.<sup>24</sup>

In these same years, social justice movements drew women into activism against the white male supremacy entrenched in American law, culture, and foreign policy. Women were essential foot soldiers and leaders in the civil rights movement, although men often took the credit. Many worked through churches where men typically preached and women did the selfless work. A robust antiwar movement protested the compulsory service of the military draft. Women applied these democratic currents to their own economic situations, pursuing workplace opportunity and more sweeping guarantees. Some formed an interracial welfare rights movement, many of whose members and leaders were Black women recipients, which asserted poor women's right to care for children and the elderly in their own homes. That movement sought higher benefits, dignified treatment, and a seat at the table in making welfare policy. This pressure started to move federal and some state authorities, who began to expand aid and the ranks of its recipients. Home healthcare workers also pursued more rights and respect for their crucial but devalued work in their clients' homes. Activists and government officials in the late 1960s unsettled the decades-old boundaries of the welfare state, opening up new possibilities for work and citizenship.<sup>25</sup>

Campaigning for president in 1968, Republican Richard Nixon couched his predecessors' emphasis on volunteerism within his broader mission to shrink the state's responsibilities to care for its citizens. He laid out this vision in two national radio addresses several weeks before the election. "The more the Federal Government has tried to solve all our problems, the more it has seemed to fail," he said in the first speech.<sup>26</sup> Nixon argued that federal bureaucrats had "subordinate[d] volunteer efforts to government efforts," but those local volunteers were better suited to tend to the neediest in their communities.<sup>27</sup> In a related address eleven days later, a shrewd move to raise his standing in a tight race at the apex of American entanglement in the unpopular Vietnam War, Nixon declared that he would create an all-voluntary military if elected. He called the compulsory draft "an infringement on" young men's "liberty" inflicted by "a government insensitive to their rights" and "callous to their status as free men."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Ellis and Campbell, *By the People*, 238–9; Annelise Orleck, "Introduction: The War on Poverty from the Grassroots Up," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*, eds. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gaye Hazirjian (Athens, GA, 2011), 9–11; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*; Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, 2005); Crystal R. Sanders, *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi's Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016); Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); and Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford, UK, 2004).

<sup>25</sup>Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism* (New York, 2014), 65–73, 111–3, 148–57; Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago, 2002), 149; Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, NY, 1990), 142; Tuuri, *Strategic Sisterhood*, 5; Berry and Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States*, 169–74; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 122, 132; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, especially xv; Kirsten Swinth, *Feminism's Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 138–42; Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York, 2012).

<sup>26</sup>Maxey, "The Volunteers," 17.

<sup>27</sup>"Nixon Links Federal Bureaucracy to Unrest: Candidate Hits Impersonal Government, Urges Enlisting of Voluntary Resources," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 7, 1968, 7.

<sup>28</sup>Beth Bailey, *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 2.

Nixon placed at the center of his campaign the message that the freedom to volunteer should replace individuals' obligations to government, and vice versa.

Nixon ran as the "law and order" candidate in order to ground his plan to cut government programs that paid local people for their feminized community work in poor areas.<sup>29</sup> He channeled many white Americans' racial resentments and fears that the nation's social fabric was fraying. Late 1960s law and order politics fused specific concerns about rising street crime, political protest, and urban uprisings with more nebulous anxieties, but it demanded a strong response: firm punishment, ethical leadership, and stricter social spending. Once in office, President Nixon shifted federal funds away from the War on Poverty and toward aggressive crime control and expanding incarceration. He and other politicians in both parties began to peddle order by arguing that the U.S.'s most marginalized citizens were simply not governable, and thus, government had no responsibility for their well-being.<sup>30</sup>

To diminish state support for women's caring labors in their homes, Nixon sought to reshape Americans' economic rights by transforming welfare. That system, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was under increasing pressure. The number of families receiving AFDC rose sharply in the late 1960s. Its recipients sought expanded aid in the form of a guaranteed annual income to lift poor women out of poverty, a policy that liberals in Nixon's administration persuaded him to adopt, but with a twist. Nixon and his allies critiqued AFDC as too bureaucratic and focused on Black single mothers to the exclusion of white "working poor" families.<sup>31</sup> They proposed to replace AFDC with the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), a streamlined cash payment to impoverished families with dependent children. The FAP was designed to channel the most benefits to wage-earning, two-parent households and to encourage others to form them. The proposed program defined wage earners against non-wage-earning welfare recipients and required those deemed "employable" to pursue employment, training, or education—thereby defining recipients' labors in their own homes as different from and less valuable than work.<sup>32</sup>

Nixon proposed rolling back the social safety net by offloading state support for feminized caring labors onto volunteers. He issued Executive Order 11470 four months into his presidency. The provision set up a National Program for Voluntary Action, which sought to "promote more widespread reliance on and recognition of voluntary activities," to help voluntary groups articulate their concerns to the federal government, and to foster new federal initiatives to encourage voluntary action.<sup>33</sup> It also set up a new Cabinet Committee on Voluntary Action chaired by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary George Romney, the moderate former governor of Michigan, to boost cooperation between departments and agencies on volunteerism. Through HUD, Nixon explained, Romney would promote volunteerism to address "problems associated with conditions of urban living or with poverty" and make grants to support the development of "innovative private voluntary

<sup>29</sup>Russell Freeburg, "Law and Order Another of His Goals," *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 9, 1968, 1.

<sup>30</sup>Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 84, 88; Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 2005), 1–4, 10; Greg Weiner, *American Burke: The Uncommon Liberalism of Daniel Patrick Moynihan* (Lawrence, KS, 2015), 1, 62–3, 66–8; Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 3, 16–7, 20–2; Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2010), 2; Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough*, 3–6.

<sup>31</sup>Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 16.

<sup>32</sup>Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 157–8; Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough*, 134–6, 139; Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), 167.

<sup>33</sup>Richard Nixon, "Executive Order 11470 - Prescribing Arrangements for the Structure and Conduct of a National Program for Voluntary Action, May 26, 1969," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/305971> (accessed Apr. 9, 2019).

action programs.”<sup>34</sup> Federal departments issued policy statements encouraging volunteering, including Agriculture, Justice, Commerce, Labor, and Health, Education and Welfare.<sup>35</sup>

As Nixon’s advisors explained, the president sought to do more than tinker inside the executive branch and cheerlead for the work of benevolence. The volunteering push anchored their plan to re-privatize social needs provision. Nixon had witnessed “a progression of events in American life, starting with the Great Depression of the thirties,” explained Christopher Mould, the first director of the U.S. Office of Voluntary Action, “in which Americans increasingly looked to government—most often Federal Government—for solution of the problems facing them.”<sup>36</sup> But lawmakers had built the New Deal in response to a crisis of “vast dimensions,” and one that had passed.<sup>37</sup> “Governmental action was once the last resort, when every other effort failed,” George Romney similarly appealed to the pre-New Deal era in an address to leaders of the United Service Organizations.<sup>38</sup> Rather than “wait for a paternalistic government to come and do the job for them,” previous generations “did it themselves” and “produced the American miracle.”<sup>39</sup> But since the 1930s, Americans had been “pass[ing] our problems up the line—from the individual and his voluntary cooperative associations up to local government, then to the state, and finally to Washington.”<sup>40</sup> Romney’s appeal to that laissez-faire tradition overlooked how the government had given plenty of help to corporations and white men in those years.<sup>41</sup>

Nixon and his administration set out to redefine volunteered caregiving as superior to waged. “What really distinguishes volunteerism is that it provides services; it brings forth efforts that money simply could not buy” and “brings Americans together,” Nixon said.<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, the Director of the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, offered a concrete example. Koontz described how volunteers strengthened the partnership among Women in Community Service (WICS), the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Department of Labor. WICS was contracted to recruit and vet young women for the Jobs Corps, a vocational training program for teens and young adults. But the WICS volunteers did much more, helping recruits navigate the bureaucracy, matching them to legal aid and health agencies, and building relationships with trainees’ families. The volunteers not only strengthened the program, they also cut its cost. WICS spent about \$44 per recruit to the Job Corps, where the U.S. Employment Services spent over \$100. “It is readily apparent that volunteer participation cannot only make a government program more efficient and less costly but can also add the personal touch,” Koontz declared.<sup>43</sup>

To realize his ambitious plans to free the state from funding feminized caring labors, Nixon created ACTION, a convergence and expansion of existing federally sponsored volunteer programs whose many acronyms may have been intended to evoke the New Deal’s “alphabet soup”

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ellis and Campbell, *By the People*, 247.

<sup>36</sup>Christopher Mould, “Address to the Institute for Lifetime Learning,” Mar. 25, 1970, folder 20, box 48, Elsie H. Hillman Papers, ULS Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA [hereafter EHP].

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>George Romney, “Address to the National Council Meeting of the United Service Organizations,” Mar. 12, 1970, 3, folder 20, box 48, EHP.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>For instance, see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2005); and Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York, 2017).

<sup>42</sup>Richard Nixon, “Remarks at the First Annual Awards Dinner of the National Center for Voluntary Action, Feb. 10, 1972,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255072> (accessed Apr. 9, 2019).

<sup>43</sup>Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, “Volunteerism: A Vital Contribution,” *AAUW Journal* (Jan. 1970): 66–8, here 68.



of social programs.<sup>44</sup> These included the Peace Corps and VISTA, SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), ACE (Active Corps of Executives), FGP (Foster Grandparent Program), RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program), and UYA (University Year for Action).<sup>45</sup> He also appointed a new consultant on voluntary action, Detroit industrialist and philanthropist Max Fisher, to work with Romney to consult with private sector leaders, social service providers, and other community groups on how the government could actively boost volunteering.<sup>46</sup> In the summer and fall of 1969, Romney and Fisher convened these meetings to solicit ideas and foster interest in working with the Nixon administration.<sup>47</sup> The goal, Romney explained, was to develop “a creative partnership of government and non-governmental forces.”<sup>48</sup>

In these meetings, Nixon administration officials asked open-ended questions about the focus and direction their voluntary action programs should take.<sup>49</sup> They heard concerns like those raised by Carol Bergan, president of the welfare council of metropolitan Chicago, at a May 1969 meeting between Romney and representatives of local health and welfare councils. “We recognize the value and potential of voluntary action to help solve community problems,” she said, expressing her gratitude that federal officials wanted to help. But volunteering programs should be “a supplement to, and in no way a substitute for, adequate Federal and other public funds and programs.” She urged officials to take “great care” to “avoid the invalid assumption that a voluntary enterprise can assume some of the major functions now carried on by the Federal government in the fields of health, social welfare, and related programs.”<sup>50</sup>

Nixon had indeed imagined the very kind of shift Bergan cautioned against, publicly suggesting that volunteer groups should “move in” and “take over” the administration of social services.<sup>51</sup> These meetings helped convince his allies that such a plan would meet significant resistance from existing groups and the general public. “General encouragement [of volunteering] presents no hazards,” HUD official Merrill F. Krughoff wrote to other administration officials working on the volunteering effort, “assuming we don’t claim that voluntary action can substitute for governmental action.”<sup>52</sup>

Faced with these warnings, Nixon retreated. In late 1969 he introduced the NCVA, which was the private sector arm of his volunteering campaign. This \$7.5 million “non-profit, non-partisan” center would serve as a hub of information and support for state and local volunteering programs.<sup>53</sup> More Americans would like to volunteer, Nixon said, but the right opportunities were not always at hand. He explained that the NCVA would “master common needs and problems” to “encourage and assist effective voluntary action throughout the private sector.”<sup>54</sup> Nixon himself served as the honorary chairman.<sup>55</sup> He dropped into a White House meeting of the Board of Directors’ nominating committee in late 1969. “I was thinking this morning that when one remembers great Americans one never recalls how much they were paid,” he told the gathering of government officials, leaders of nonprofits and universities, and

<sup>44</sup>Bernard K. Means, “Introduction: ‘Alphabet Soup’ and American Archaeology,” in *Shovel Ready: Archaeology and Roosevelt’s New Deal for America*, ed. Bernard K. Means (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2013), 1–18, here 4.

<sup>45</sup>“ACTION Seeks More Volunteers to Work Toward Social Goals,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Aug. 28, 1973, 3.

<sup>46</sup>“Nixon Announces Creation of Voluntary Action Panel,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 5, 1969, 16.

<sup>47</sup>“Participants in Voluntary Action Meeting,” May 23, 1969, folder 7, box 48, EHP.

<sup>48</sup>George Romney to Isadore Seeman, Apr. 30, 1969, folder 7, box 48, EHP.

<sup>49</sup>Michael Klion to Max M. Fisher, June 13, 1969, June 11, 1969, folder 7, box 48, EHP.

<sup>50</sup>“The National Program for Voluntary Action, Representatives of Health and Welfare Councils, Million and Over Conference,” May 23, 1969, folder 7, box 48, EHP.

<sup>51</sup>“National Program Seeks to Encourage Those Who Give a Helping Hand,” *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 1971, 40.

<sup>52</sup>Merrill F. Krughoff to C.F. McNeil and Division Heads of Voluntary Action Program, June 16, 1969, folder 3, box 48, EHP.

<sup>53</sup>“Nixon Will Organize ‘Volunteers,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 3, 1970, 4.

<sup>54</sup>“Nixon Announces Creation of Voluntary Action Panel,” 16.

<sup>55</sup>“U.S. Program of ‘Voluntary Action’ Set Up,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 5, 1969, C15

corporate bigwigs.<sup>56</sup> “One only remembers how much they served. It will be that way with all of us.”<sup>57</sup> In this comment and more formal speeches, Nixon used the very nature of volunteering to highlight the helper’s goodness and volition and decenter the claims of the helped.<sup>58</sup>

The NCVA accomplished little in its first year, as its boosters struggled to carve out a viable space in the realm of social needs provision. Nixon advisor Max Fisher explained its slow start: “There were hundreds of agencies, hundreds of emerging ethnic groups and associations you had to talk to if you wanted their cooperation.”<sup>59</sup> NCVA leaders’ meetings with representatives of more than 250 national groups, said NCVA official Arch McKinley, failed “to allay anxieties by some” that the NCVA would implement “some kind of giant take-over” of already existing volunteer programs.<sup>60</sup> Labor leaders expressed concern that the voluntary action programs would erode union jobs. Existing volunteer groups accused officials of encroaching upon their turf.<sup>61</sup> NCVA officials denied that they would compete. “Organizations already doing an outstanding job” should understand that “we are not trying to envelop them in any way or duplicate the effective unique services they are performing. Our aim is to help them to do a better job,” said the NCVA’s first leader, Nixon advisor and former University of Oklahoma football coach Bud Wilkinson.<sup>62</sup> Still, officials were vague about the specifics.

The Center’s leaders grew more confident as major donations from corporate leaders started rolling in. They positioned the NCVA as a clearinghouse to gather and disseminate information on local volunteer projects, responding to 100 monthly inquiries in early 1971.<sup>63</sup> Its leaders also sought to affiliate with the 160 existing volunteer bureaus nationwide and rename them Voluntary Action Centers.<sup>64</sup> As of 1971 there were Voluntary Action Centers in thirty-two communities, with dozens more on the way.<sup>65</sup> The NCVA gave out awards for local volunteers, receiving almost 700 nominations in six months.<sup>66</sup> By mid-1972 the NCVA had a staff of fifty-five and handled 600 inquiries per month.<sup>67</sup> NCVA staffers proposed introducing national volunteer awards, an annual volunteer day, and an “official volunteer flag,” with a red symbol on a white background, “to be flown by voluntary organizations everywhere.”<sup>68</sup>

The leaders also expanded their outreach, construing feminized forms of volunteering as essential contributions that everyone could make. At first, the Center presented volunteering in traditional packaging, as the feminine counterpart of men’s paid careers. The press covered the nearly two-dozen trips taken by First Lady Pat Nixon, Lenore Romney (George Romney’s wife), and other cabinet members’ wives as they promoted volunteering through the NCVA’s “celebrity corps.”<sup>69</sup> Nixon applauded women for volunteering more often than men in remarks to the 1972 NCVA gala. Whether it was “because they have more time” or “because they have

<sup>56</sup>“Draft of President’s Remarks, Drop-In on Meeting of the Nominating Committee for the Board of Directors of the National Center for Voluntary Action,” Nov. 25, 1969, folder: Cabinet Committee on Voluntary Action, May 29, 1969–November 5, 1970, box 1, Cabinet Committee on Voluntary Action, FG 252, White House Central Files, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA [hereafter RNPL].

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>“U.S. Program of ‘Voluntary Action’ Set Up,” C15.

<sup>59</sup>“National Program Seeks to Encourage Those Who Give a Helping Hand,” 40.

<sup>60</sup>Marie Smith, “How Henry and Bud Will Spend that \$7.5 Million,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 1970, K6.

<sup>61</sup>Maxey, “The Volunteers,” 17.

<sup>62</sup>Smith, “How Henry and Bud Will Spend that \$7.5 Million,” K6.

<sup>63</sup>“National Program Seeks to Encourage Those Who Give a Helping Hand,” 40.

<sup>64</sup>Krughoff to McNeil and Division Heads, June 16, 1969, EHP; “Voluntary Action Centers Described by Henry Ford,” 5.

<sup>65</sup>“Voluntary Action Centers Described by Henry Ford,” 5.

<sup>66</sup>H. I. Romney to Elsie Hillman, Sept. 20, 1971, folder 4, box 48, EHP.

<sup>67</sup>Nancy Newgent to Dana G. Mead, July 19, 1972, folder: NCVA 1/15/71–12/16/72, box 1, FG 252, RNPL.

<sup>68</sup>“NCVA Action Plan, 1972–75,” folder 17, box 48, EHP.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid. See also Dorothy McCardle, “A Trip for Cabinet Wives,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 11, 1971, C5; Marie Smith, “Volunteer Office for First Lady,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 3, 1970, IV2; and Ursula Vils, “Lenore Romney Searches for Those Who Care,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 2, 1973, IV1.

more heart,” he said, “there is no area where women can render greater service than in volunteerism.”<sup>70</sup> He embedded this jab at feminists’ rising demands within his praise for gendered selflessness. Nixon spoke just weeks after he vetoed the Comprehensive Childcare Development Act, which would have provided universal, affordable childcare and given parents of young children the discretion to work, volunteer, or take rest.<sup>71</sup>

NCVA leaders argued that the image of the well-to-do “lady Bountiful” who burnished her status through conspicuous community service was outdated because volunteering was becoming democratized. More different types of people were volunteering than ever before, explained Harriet H. Naylor, the NCVA’s director of educational development, at a 1974 seminar. Older people increasingly volunteered because “[i]t keeps them from aging too fast.”<sup>72</sup> The federal program RSVP grew from 15,000 to 115,000 from mid-1973 to early 1975. Students’ volunteering had expanded 80-fold since 1963, as high schools increasingly offered credit for some volunteering.<sup>73</sup> A brochure from the central Maryland Voluntary Action Center in the mid-1970s called volunteering “a classless concept,” but really, it offered a way for those in the tenuous middle class to remain there, whether by asserting their superiority over those they helped or by gaining experience they could use to later earn a paycheck.<sup>74</sup>

The NCVA encouraged men to consider service-oriented volunteering—men who would no longer be pressed into military service, since Nixon had ended the draft. “Usually when you’ve read about voluntary action, the story has been on the women’s page,” NCVA vice president Arch McKinley told the Volunteers of America banquet in 1970. “You’ll still find it there. That’s because women have the time, inclination and energy and good hearts to engage in voluntary activities. But, with a tip of the hat to the lassies, I must say that voluntary action is everybody’s business, everybody’s work and should be everybody’s interest.”<sup>75</sup> The NCVA targeted men in ads that emphasized their singular authority. One such ad featured a photo of a tough white teen standing in front of a beat-up car. “Frankie Covello’s mother works in a hospital,” the ad explained, where “she puts in a lot of overtime.” Frankie often looked after his five siblings, and the police had caught him stripping cars. “Frankie’s mother loves him,” the ad claimed, “but he needs someone to talk to. Man to man. Someone who thinks there’s more to life than gang fights, pushing drugs or rolling bums. Someone like you.”<sup>76</sup> The ad encouraged male readers to see themselves as mentors and surrogate fathers but said nothing about the kind of help Frankie’s mother deserved as a single parent *and* a breadwinner.

Ads like Frankie’s, as well as those the NCVA created in partnership with the National Football League (NFL), asserted that a man could pursue cultural authority not as a bearer of rights himself—rights on the job or the right to breadwinner status, both rights that were waning in a shifting economy—but as an attendant to someone else’s needs. The NFL campaign comprised print ads and short commercials that ran during the 1972 football season. In the ads, which generated an estimated three billion “impressions,” thirty-three of the players who were locked in combat during the game exposed a softer side.<sup>77</sup> New York Jets center John Schmitt highlighted his commitment to ending drug abuse by wrapping a shoelace around his arm to mimic an addict preparing to inject himself. “This,” he declared, “is a murder

<sup>70</sup>Sally Quinn, “A Word for the Women: The President and Women’s Lib,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 11, 1972, B1.

<sup>71</sup>Deborah Dinner, “The Universal Childcare Debate: Rights Mobilization, Social Policy, and the Dynamics of Feminist Activism, 1966–1974,” *Law and History Review* 28, no. 3 (Aug. 2010), 557–628.

<sup>72</sup>Gabrielle Wise, “Voluntarism Called Necessary ‘Movement’ That’s Gaining Quickly,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 4, 1974, A10.

<sup>73</sup>Clayton Jones, “Volunteers in the U.S. Busy, Busy,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 3, 1975, 1.

<sup>74</sup>Wise, “Voluntarism Called Necessary ‘Movement’ That’s Gaining Quickly,” A10.

<sup>75</sup>Arch McKinley, “Address to Volunteers of America Banquet,” Mar. 10, 1970, folder 20, box 48, EHP.

<sup>76</sup>Advertisement reprinted in NCVA Report to the Board of Directors, undated, ca. 1972, folder 17, box 48, EHP.

<sup>77</sup>Douglas K. Kinsey to NCVA Board Members, Nov. 7, 1972, 1, folder 5, box 48, EHP.

weapon.”<sup>78</sup> New England Patriots quarterback Jim Plunkett reflected upon his unpaid hours at a Mexican American community center. “I was always taught to leave something more beautiful than I found it,” said Los Angeles Rams defensive tackle Merlin Olsen, who described the problem of water pollution from behind the helm of his boat.<sup>79</sup> “What we need money can’t buy,” each player declared at the end of his ad. “We need you.”<sup>80</sup>

But whether money could, or should, buy these services was no settled matter in that early 1970s moment of economic and cultural flux. Across the country, across the political spectrum, Americans reckoned with a shaky economy. This turbulence grounded business leaders’ efforts to destabilize work by prioritizing corporate flexibility and shareholder value rather than workers’ security. Labor laws proved too weak to ensure those workers’ rights to form unions and protect their jobs amid deindustrialization and globalization. Business owners, facing that global competition, grew less willing to pay for workers’ social welfare benefits. These economic changes unfolded alongside social movements that challenged white male authority and the welfare state that built its benefits around it. As women’s workforce participation began to rise more rapidly in the early 1970s, they and previously excluded men of color wielded new legal protections including the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to pry their way into the good jobs white men had long monopolized.<sup>81</sup>

As women’s social roles shifted, Nixon’s campaign to discharge feminized caring labors onto volunteers began to draw fierce criticism from women who sought both better pay for feminized labors *and* more respect for their unpaid activities. The long-simmering frustration among Republican Party clubwomen at being relegated to supportive work began to boil over. “The time is past,” declared conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, “when the women of the Republican Party are merely doorbell pushers. We have earned our right to participate in the making of policies at the top.”<sup>82</sup> Across the political spectrum from Schlafly were feminists seeking to dismantle the gendered division of labor inside the home and the workplace. Some wanted to abolish capitalism, or to dramatically regulate it. Others pursued women’s increased economic participation through subsidized childcare and assistance for feminist entrepreneurs. Debating the worth and purpose of volunteering became a way to contest the value of social safety net programs, women’s social rights and legal equality, and, especially, unpaid caring labor.<sup>83</sup>

The most direct detractor of Nixon’s volunteerism plan was NOW, which sought to abolish gendered notions of work by demanding new forms of economic equality. If women earned adequate wages at work, they could pay for the care they could not provide in their families. By the early 1970s, NOW had tens of thousands of members in hundreds of chapters across the country, most of whom were white wage-earning women.<sup>84</sup> Only two percent of the group’s

<sup>78</sup>Paul Zimmerman, “Football Vigilantes,” *New York Post*, July 25, 1972, clipping, folder: NCVA 1/15/71–12/16/72, box 1, FG 252, RNPL.

<sup>79</sup>Zimmerman, “Football Vigilantes,” RNPL.

<sup>80</sup>“Football Will Aid Volunteer Work,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1972, 40.

<sup>81</sup>Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 9, 12; Louis Hyman, *Temp: How American Work, American Business, and the American Dream Became Temporary* (New York, 2018), 161–3; Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 213; Self, *All in the Family*, 8; Swinth, *Feminism’s Forgotten Fight*, 3, 6; Turk, *Equality on Trial*; Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door*, 12, 35, 58.

<sup>82</sup>Donald Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton, NJ, 2008), 139.

<sup>83</sup>Rymph, *Republican Women*, 4; Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women’s Movements* (New York, 2014), 89, 107–8, 125–6; Joshua Clark Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs* (New York, 2017), 130–1.

<sup>84</sup>On NOW’s structure, chapters, and campaigns, see, for instance, Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca, NY, 2004); Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (New York, 2012); Lisa Levenstein, “‘Don’t Agonize, Organize!’ The Displaced Homemakers Campaign and the Contested Goals of Postwar Feminism,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 4 (Mar. 2014): 1114–38; and Katherine Turk, “Out of the Revolution, into

members in 1974 were full-time volunteers.<sup>85</sup> NOW's leaders and members critiqued the widespread acceptance of women's volunteering to meet social needs as an impediment to feminist efforts to create an egalitarian society. They also rebuked Nixon's volunteerism strategy as an attack on state-funded social programs and a move to further degrade women's work. "We are not fooled by those who try to co-opt people to volunteer for human services, social services, health and social research," NOW president Wilma Scott Heide told the group's national conference in 1974. "This nation pays for those things we truly value."<sup>86</sup>

To tackle the problem, NOW leaders argued that volunteers in schools, hospitals, and churches adopted a pseudo-housewife role that replaced pay with praise, compounding sex and class inequalities.<sup>87</sup> NOW's Volunteerism Task Force was one of twenty-six national action committees that convened at the group's 1972 conference.<sup>88</sup> Volunteering offered middle-class women flexibility and community in a workforce defined by "fixed hours, rigid routines set by others, monotony, regularity, and particularly, men's control," claimed Queens-based NOW volunteerism activist, writer, and former teacher Doris Gold.<sup>89</sup> She argued that the answer was to make work more flexible and ensure everyone received a fair wage. "15 unpaid women in a hospital are keeping out 15 women who need money," Gold quipped. "And for all the volunteers we have in hospitals, we still have lousy health service."<sup>90</sup>

This argument by NOW members such as Gold—that pay was the appropriate way to gauge a task's value, and unpaid tasks were by definition devalued—seemed simple enough. But NOW's relationship to its own work was not so clear cut. The organization could not run without its members' free labor. To justify its in-house volunteer labor force, NOW's leaders argued that volunteering should be divided into two categories. In general, feminized effort unrewarded with a wage was "an extension of unpaid housework" that "serve[d] to maintain woman's dependent and secondary status."<sup>91</sup> But what NOW termed "change-directed" volunteering for organizations like itself was acceptable because it sought to move women out of traditional roles in society.<sup>92</sup> NOW resolved to "raise the consciousness of women engaged in these volunteer activities, so that they use their 'volunteer power' in an effort to change policies detrimental to the interests of women."<sup>93</sup> Framing this divided approach to women's volunteering as clear-cut and sensible, NOW sought to convince women not to volunteer in supportive roles and confronted the institutions that relied on their unpaid labor.

The Volunteerism Task Force launched a media blitz. Most major newspapers and magazines covered NOW's critique of volunteering; so did radio and television programs, including

---

the Mainstream: Employment Activism in the NOW Sears Campaign and the Growing Pains of Liberal Feminism," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 2 (Sept. 2010): 399–423.

<sup>85</sup>Gene Boyer, "Report of the Finance Vice-President to the NOW National Conference," May 1974, folder 1, box 4, JoAnn Evansgardner and Gerald H. F. Gardner Papers, ULS Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>86</sup>Wilma Scott Heide, "Keynote Address to NOW's Seventh Annual Conference, Houston, TX," May 25, 1974, folder 1, box 1, Jean Witter Papers, 1953–2007, ULS Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>87</sup>Aileen Hernandez to Edwin D. Etherington, undated, ca. 1971, folder 13, box 31, RON; "Resolution on Volunteerism Adopted by the National Organization for Women, Fifth National Conference, September 4–6, 1971," folder 7, box 328, ARN.

<sup>88</sup>"Workshop Information: Existing Task Forces," *Do It NOW* (Dec. 1972), 3–5.

<sup>89</sup>Doris B. Gold, "Women and Voluntarism," in *Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York, 1971), 384–400, here 390.

<sup>90</sup>Stoll, "Feminist Thinks Volunteerism Is a 'Compassion Trap.'"

<sup>91</sup>"Resolution on Volunteerism Adopted by the National Organization for Women's Fifth National Conference," ARN.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

Barbara Walters's NBC show and the PBS program *Woman*.<sup>94</sup> An October 1975 episode of the sitcom *All in the Family* explored NOW's perspective, with Archie Bunker lecturing his wife Edith on her community service: "If it's worth doing it's worth getting paid for."<sup>95</sup> Members printed materials and posted them in schools, hospitals, and social service agencies.<sup>96</sup> A typical NOW pamphlet featured an embedded NCVA ad. Below a drawing of an elderly woman featuring the NCVA tagline "What she needs money can't buy," NOW printed its own text:

Money certainly CAN buy what people need, including other people to talk to. Maybe that very same old woman wouldn't feel so lonely if she were paid a bit to talk to others. Those tutors the kids need would do just as well, probably better, if they were paid. (We do pay doctors, teachers and social workers.) Social services like these are necessary—enough so to be paid for.<sup>97</sup>

But what of the feminized labors performed by the women those social service providers helped? By contrast to NOW's approach to revalorizing feminized labors by boosting access to the labor force and the wages they earned there, several streams of feminism sought to re-valorize women's unpaid domestic work. The welfare rights movement reached its peak influence in the early 1970s. Nixon's proposed welfare overhaul, the FAP, offered low benefits for unemployed parents designed to nudge women into wage work or reliance upon a male breadwinner. Deeming the program stingy and coercive, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) launched a nationwide "Zap FAP" campaign that combined protest with negotiation. "Surely the mother is in the best position to know what effect her taking a particular job would have on her young school child," explained NWRO leader Beulah Sanders in her testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee, which debated FAP. "But now we are told that for welfare mothers the choice will be made for them, work for the mother, government centers for the children, the government decides."<sup>98</sup> The NWRO instead advanced its own legislation for a more generous guaranteed minimum income. The NWRO's activism helped to kill the FAP, but its own proposal also languished in Congress.<sup>99</sup>

And why should the labor market in its existing form be the only site where women's work was paid? A new international Wages for Housework movement argued that the home was a site of labor extraction rather than a safe haven from capitalism. "To demand wages for housework exposes housework as work and negates it as a function of love," asserted a 1974 conference of an international Wages for Housework collective.<sup>100</sup> The group claimed that winning wages for housework would begin to bring about the "socialization of housework on our terms, to liberate our time," and ultimately, "to begin to destroy all of the power relations within the working class which are based on the division between the wage and the wageless."<sup>101</sup> Although the many feminists debating the problem of domestic work mostly sought to socialize it through institutions like community daycare centers, to ease women's workforce participation through parental leave and nondiscrimination policies, or to convince male partners to

<sup>94</sup>Pat McCormick to Members of the Board, Task Force Coordinators, State Coordinators, Members of the Task Force, Dec. 24, 1975, folder 78, box 50, RON.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Enid Nemy, "NOW Attacks Volunteerism—But Others Rally to Its Defense," *New York Times*, June 7, 1974, 41.

<sup>97</sup>"What They Need ... Money CAN Buy," Nov. 6, 1972, folder 13, box 31, RON.

<sup>98</sup>Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 178–9.

<sup>99</sup>Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 137–60; Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough*, 134–40; Self, *All in the Family*, 39–40.

<sup>100</sup>Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–77* (Vancouver, 2018), 123.

<sup>101</sup>Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 124.

shoulder more of it, the Wages for Housework movement pushed to redefine the meaning and value of domestic labors.<sup>102</sup>

The issue of how to meet social needs stressed divisions among women's advocates, who sparred over how to value caring labor: whether to turn it into paid employment, support it with public funds to care for women's own families, or tap into their free efforts as a community imperative. Although NOW issued a resolution in 1970 that declared poverty a women's issue and asserted its support for the NWRO, and the organization would soon define the home a site of valuable work, its agenda on labor hewed closest to white, middle-class women's concerns. Welfare rights activists including Sanders accused NOW, in its focus on "displaced homemakers" thrust newly into the labor force after divorce or becoming widowed, of "trying to avoid dealing with poor 'Third World women'" by "creating a constituency of middle-class White women with whom they can relate most comfortably."<sup>103</sup> NOW's leaders responded that welfare recipients had a robust welfare rights movement to speak for them.<sup>104</sup>

This dialogue about who should be performing caring labors and for what remuneration helped to precipitate a four-day, 700-person Junior League-sponsored conference on volunteerism in 1974. Held in Minneapolis in April 1974, the People Power conference drew attendees from 30 states and Canada and had taken 120 volunteers more than a year to arrange. The gathering was intended as a forum where different women's groups could debate issues related to volunteering and offer recommendations to the NCVA. Debate they did.<sup>105</sup>

At the conference, NOW Volunteerism Task Force leaders expressed their diagnosis of the problem of women's volunteering and explained their proposed solution. Other women's advocates pointed out that women volunteers had long used the fact of their non-payment to ease their entry into waged labor. Chief among proponents of "professional volunteers" was Ellen Straus, founder of the Call for Action Volunteer Program.<sup>106</sup> Call for Action was a national network of volunteers who helped connect social service providers and the people who needed them. Straus and her allies argued that volunteers should be hired and supervised alongside their paid counterparts and should have written contracts, insurance protections and tax deductions, and even a volunteers' union to protect their "rights" and benefits.<sup>107</sup> At the suggestion that volunteers should be reimbursed for expenses, NOW members rushed the microphones. "You aren't talking about volunteers," one claimed. "You are talking about underpaid workers doing jobs that rightfully belong in the realm of 'real' work, for which those doing them should be fully paid."<sup>108</sup>

Others defended feminized forms of volunteering as they existed. Arvonne Fraser, president of the Women's Equity Action League, declared, "In sex or in politics, the ultimate of doing nothing unless you get paid is prostitution."<sup>109</sup> She appealed to women's generosity as a legitimate motivating force. Straus accused NOW of "stomping on other women" who volunteered because they wanted to do so.<sup>110</sup> NOW's policy was materialistic, she claimed. "Can't we do things for other people without getting paid?"<sup>111</sup> Straus later wrote, "Clearly we cannot

<sup>102</sup>Swinth, *Feminism's Forgotten Fight*, 109–15; Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, especially 1–3.

<sup>103</sup>Levenstein, "Don't Agonize, Organize," 1131–2.

<sup>104</sup>Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 219–21. On racial tensions and disparate aims among 1970s feminists, see Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge, UK, 2004).

<sup>105</sup>Joseph Geri, "What's Wrong with Voluntarism?" *Washington Post*, May 6, 1974, A14.

<sup>106</sup>Carol Kleiman, "Making It Professional: The Case for the Volunteer Worker," *Sphere: The Betty Crocker Magazine* (Sept. 1973), clipping, folder 77, box 50, RON.

<sup>107</sup>Geri, "What's Wrong with Voluntarism?," A14; Kleiman, "Making It Professional," RON.

<sup>108</sup>Mrs. Donald R. Squire, *The Volunteer Leader* (Aug. 1974), folder 77, box 210, RON.

<sup>109</sup>Geri, "What's Wrong with Voluntarism?," A14.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

put a price tag on every human act and say it does not count” unless compensated with money.<sup>112</sup>

The meeting’s final resolutions, which essentially urged the NCVA to continue to study the issue, were “notable for their timidity and blandness,” NOW observed.<sup>113</sup> Still, other groups were staking out stronger positions on feminized types of volunteering. The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) adopted the economic aspects of NOW’s position, recommending that “each woman should earn minimally and at all times, enough to support herself plus half the cost of supporting the children” because “divorce, death, and desertion are commonplace.”<sup>114</sup> NOW’s approach to volunteering also sparked debate within the Coalition for Human Needs and Budget Priorities, the Virginia Council on Social Welfare, and the National Association of Social Workers, among others.<sup>115</sup> NOW’s campaign had the greatest influence in the field of education. The United Federation of Teachers in New York State drew from NOW’s materials in issuing a strong rebuke of the use of volunteers in schools.<sup>116</sup> “We are having an impact and the victories are becoming more visible day by day,” wrote one Volunteerism Task Force leader to the others.<sup>117</sup>

But NOW’s Volunteerism Task Force continued to attract opposition from women who emphasized the benefits of unremunerated caring work. These critics were not just the social conservatives mobilizing in these years to shore up traditional norms of family and femininity. From varied perspectives that reflected the many forms and purposes of women’s unpaid labors, they emphasized the importance of women’s freedom to find personal fulfillment, unmet community needs, and their relative disadvantage in the labor market. At least one highlighted how NOW’s own position could seem hypocritical, given that its members’ own unpaid efforts sustained the organization. NCVA board member Hope Skillman Schary poked at this tension, addressing a letter to NOW’s Volunteerism Task Force coordinators, “Dear volunteers—or do you get paid?”<sup>118</sup>

Black women pointed out that their freely given labors factored into a pragmatic calculus. “Most black women’s organizations wouldn’t be here at all if it weren’t for volunteers,” explained Dorothy I. Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women.<sup>119</sup> Black women’s unpaid activities met a wide spectrum of their communities’ needs, from civil rights and women’s rights advocacy to running churches, schools, and food banks. “We are saying to black women that even though you work at a full-time job, you have to find some time to give volunteer service to your community. There are pieces of work that have to be done,” said Height.<sup>120</sup> She disputed NOW’s premises that advocacy and exploitation could be easily distinguished from each other—“You have to work in both directions, social service and change,” she said—and that volunteers’ tasks would be transferred to paid employees if they withheld their

<sup>112</sup>Kleiman, “Making It Professional,” RON.

<sup>113</sup>“Volunteerism: NOW Reports on a Feminist Issue: NOW Challenges Volunteering Establishment at Junior League Conference,” undated, ca. 1974, 1, folder 13, box 31, RON.

<sup>114</sup>National Council of Jewish Women, “NOW & Volunteerism,” Nov. 1974, folder 77, box 210, RON. On the NCJW, see also Kathleen A. Laughlin, “‘Our Defense against Despair’: The Progressive Politics of the National Council of Jewish Women after World War II,” in *A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America*, eds. Hasia Diner, Shira Kohn, and Rachel Kranson (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010), 48–64; and Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893–1993* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1993).

<sup>115</sup>“Revenue Sharing Activist Supports NOW Position,” *Volunteerism Newsletter*, undated, ca. 1974, folder 76, box 210, RON; “Women’s Caucus of NAWs Studies ‘The Volunteer Question,’” *Volunteering: NOW Reports on a Feminist Issue* 1, no. 2 (Oct. 1974), folder 76, box 210, RON.

<sup>116</sup>“Local 2 vs. Volunteers in N.Y. Public Schools,” *Volunteering: NOW Reports on a Feminist Issue* 1, no. 2 (Oct. 1974), folder 76, box 210, RON.

<sup>117</sup>Handwritten note on duplicated letter, Abe Levine to Pat McCormick, Feb. 14, 1974, folder 78, box 50, RON.

<sup>118</sup>Hope Skillman Schary to Letitia Sommers and Kerstin Joslyn, Nov. 24, 1971, folder 8, box 1, Papers of Doris B. Gold, 1962–1983, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, MA [hereafter PDG].

<sup>119</sup>Nemy, “NOW Attacks Volunteerism—But Others Rally to Its Defense,” 41.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*



labor.<sup>121</sup> “There are undoubtedly some instances where middle-class women might be doing something that an agency might have to hire someone to do, if pressed,” she conceded.<sup>122</sup> “But from where I sit, there are many more instances where the services would simply go unrendered.”<sup>123</sup>

Other women’s advocates similarly defined the need for volunteers in the practical terms of social needs. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs declared that NOW’s position showed “a dangerous lack of understanding of the fabric of American life.”<sup>124</sup> The arts would “diminish and possibly disappear without volunteers,” said full-time volunteer Margery K. Stich, because city budgets “simply don’t provide enough funds” for them.<sup>125</sup> The National Women’s Division of the American Jewish Congress asserted that if women withdrew their unpaid labor, “[m]illions of Americans in schools, hospitals, day care centers, old age homes and other institutions will be denied the care and assistance they require.”<sup>126</sup>

Still others defended women’s volunteerism because it could turn in to paid employment that would allow a woman to support herself. The Washington, DC job placement agency Washington Opportunities for Women (WOW) sometimes found full-time employment for former volunteers. Its spokesperson said, “I don’t want to give the impression we are urging women to offer their services for nothing in the hope it will turn into something big,” but it could be “a step in the whole career development process.”<sup>127</sup> Volunteering might also help women trying to re-enter the workforce to gain skills and confidence. Rita Penn, from Bethesda, Maryland, had spent a year as a volunteer interviewer with WOW in 1973: “As you tell others what to do, you realize what you yourself should do.”<sup>128</sup> Penn coupled her time as a volunteer with part-time work as a home instructor for Montgomery County Schools to assume a ten-month annual paid position as the coordinator of the school district’s volunteer services. The typical woman she worked with, Penn explained, told her that volunteering gave her “a chance to get dressed in the morning and act as if I’m going to a job,” preparing both practically and emotionally to enter the paid labor force.<sup>129</sup>

Others pointed to the new spirit of social equality, arguing that women should be free to define their own lives. That freedom should include choosing to engage in feminized forms of volunteering, they claimed. Skillman Schary wrote that women derived personal satisfaction from roles where they could display an “unselfish attitude” and “discover hidden talents.”<sup>130</sup> Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, the director of the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, similarly described volunteerism as a “route to self-fulfillment and creative contribution to community.”<sup>131</sup> Call for Action’s Straus criticized NOW’s campaign to dictate to women their proper roles in their communities. Straus claimed that women should be able to select the kind of social and political engagement that was meaningful to them. She asked, “How can you measure which is more important—picketing a supermarket or comforting an injured person in an emergency ward?”<sup>132</sup> Volunteering filled important personal roles for women, she wrote. Those “who are not free to work at paying jobs, yet believe volunteer work is wrong” will be stuck “at home with children and have no outlet.”<sup>133</sup>

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

<sup>122</sup>Nemy, “NOW Attacks Volunteerism—But Others Rally to its Defense,” 41.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>Kleiman, “Making It Professional,” RON.

<sup>125</sup>Pam Luecke, “Volunteerism Ailing, Says VIGOR Director,” *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 17, 1976, 14.

<sup>126</sup>Irving Spiegel, “Jewish Women Urge Volunteers to Fill Gap in ‘Social Services,’” *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1975, 34.

<sup>127</sup>Ida Kosciesza, “A Step Back for Women?,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 1973, E1.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid.

<sup>130</sup>Hope Skillman Schary to Letitia Sommers and Kerstin Joslyn, Nov. 24, 1971, folder 8, box 1, PDG.

<sup>131</sup>Koontz, “Volunteerism: A Vital Contribution,” 66.

<sup>132</sup>Kleiman, “Making It Professional,” RON.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.

NOW members projected confidence in their clear-cut distinction between types of volunteering, but they struggled to persuade other women of their position without coming across as demeaning or judgmental. Some in the organization grew more ambivalent. NOW Task Force on Older Women leader Tish Sommers, who had once led the group's volunteerism campaign, wrote that for displaced homemakers—divorced or widowed older women who could not easily transition into self-supporting work—volunteering was indeed an avenue to independence that could permit women to care for themselves. Sommers argued that NOW should advocate “a new kind of volunteering—not the do good, self-denigrating, guilt-ridden, this-is-my-duty type,” and not volunteering for a political cause, “but a self-interested exchange of labor for training and references and chances at job openings.”<sup>134</sup> Were there “dangers of exploitation? Yes, but with proper advocacy there is far less chance than with other options open to the displaced homemaker.”<sup>135</sup> Sommers and others in NOW started to argue that volunteering's practical benefits for women outweighed the more abstract critiques.<sup>136</sup>

As Americans disputed the nature and future of caring labors, Nixon's campaign shaped a national debate that drew advocates into disagreement. The media's new emphasis on volunteering and gatherings like the People Power conference brought into focus the problem of unpaid and undervalued feminized work amid women's new social roles, only to expose the different lenses Americans applied to it. The volunteering wars highlighted the rifts among the liberal groups that sparred with Nixon as well as each other, then broke further apart as they turned their efforts elsewhere.

The volunteering wars burned bright in the mid-1970s, but they soon faded amid shifts in the nation's politics. The New Right, which began as a grassroots fusion of social and economic conservatism, had been gradually gaining influence within the Republican Party. Its figurehead was the former actor Ronald Reagan. As governor of California from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, Reagan had worked on cutting welfare and disparaging its recipients. He won the presidency in 1980 and linked an emphasis on traditional “family values” with a bold anti-statism, moving the public discourse on citizenship away from equal rights and toward draining the pool of citizens who deserved government aid. Reagan took office amid the worst recession since World War II, which had sent interest rates soaring and unemployment to its highest rate since the Great Depression.<sup>137</sup>

This conservative climate reshaped women's activism, dispersing the groups and leaders that the volunteerism question had once pulled together in collaboration and in tension. Many white-led feminist organizations, finding their domestic policy agendas stymied, directed their political ambitions overseas and often away from the care agenda that working class feminists and women of color would take up in the 1990s. Organized feminism grew far more diffuse and was channeled not only through women's groups, but through professional and religious associations, nonprofits, universities, and more. NOW left the volunteering issue behind for good in the late 1970s when its leaders placed ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment at the center of their agenda. Black women's organizations addressed the toxic fallout from law and order politics—mass incarceration and urban disinvestment—and helped build the Free South Africa movement to end apartheid there. The welfare rights movement contended with emboldened conservatives' racist caricatures and claims that welfare itself created poverty and destroyed nuclear families. On the other side of the political spectrum, conservative women won more access to power within the Republican Party upon the condition

<sup>134</sup>Tish Sommers to Doris Gold, Dec. 16, 1976, folder 13, box 1, PDG.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid.

<sup>136</sup>On Sommers, see Levenstein, “Don't Agonize, Organize.”

<sup>137</sup>Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough*, 123–4; Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York, 2019), 101–2, 118–9; Self, *All in the Family*, 309, 369.

that they reject gender equity. More broadly, Americans' participation in membership organizations declined rapidly, and the previous decade's economic shocks had made the volunteerism question mostly irrelevant—more women simply had to earn wages.<sup>138</sup>

Women's advocates turned away from the volunteering question, but Nixon's volunteerism strategy continued. His successors in the 1980s repackaged volunteerism from a kind of activity into a rhetoric stripped of even the minimal institutional support Nixon had once promoted. Reagan applied the new conservative orthodoxy of small government to development projects abroad and the economic crisis back home; he shepherded through Congress billions in tax cuts, the deregulation of markets and industries, and social spending cuts to programs that served the poorest Americans. In his efforts to shrink government provision for social needs, Reagan found the discourse of volunteerism to be especially useful. It meshed perfectly with the right-wing mantras of individual choice, personal responsibility, religious calling, and racializing welfare recipients to discredit their calls for support for their caregiving labors.<sup>139</sup> Nonprofit organizations estimated that public funding for social services dropped by \$100 billion during Reagan's two terms in office.<sup>140</sup> "The era of big government solving problems for people and the country is over," a Reagan administration official described the president's philosophy in 1982. "Therefore we have to find a new way to handle these human needs."<sup>141</sup>

Reagan called for a private sector effort to take up the feminized labors involved in the social programs his cuts defunded as he cheered volunteers themselves. "The energy expended by our citizens in problem-solving is absolutely imperative to maintain and improve the quality of life for all Americans," Reagan said at the annual President's Volunteer Action Awards Program at the White House in 1982.<sup>142</sup> The program was co-sponsored by the NCVA, which had been renamed VOLUNTEER: The National Center for Citizen Involvement, and ACTION, the federal volunteerism agency. The eighteen award winners included people and organizations engaged in everything from natural disaster relief to recreational activities for kids to home repair for low-income seniors.<sup>143</sup> All of these services could instead have been entitlements, performed by paid government workers. Reagan's rhetoric de-emphasized the people who volunteers served, positioning them as fortunate recipients of others' generosity rather than rights-bearing citizens themselves.

Reagan's vice president and successor, George H. W. Bush, made volunteerism an even more central theme of his administration. He often referenced his conviction that a "thousand points of light" could solve social problems.<sup>144</sup> The phrase originated in postwar science fiction, but Bush's speechwriters placed it in his 1988 address upon accepting the Republican nomination for president. "I don't hate government," he said, but "we're a nation of community, of thousands and tens of thousands of ethnic, religious, social, business, labor union, neighborhood, regional and other organizations, all of them varied, voluntary and unique" and "like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky."<sup>145</sup> By invoking those "points of light," Bush expressed his conviction that "all established institutions in the nation have some moral

<sup>138</sup>Stansell, *The Feminist Promise*, 355; Berry and Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States*, 199–202; Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 199; Turk, "Out of the Revolution, into the Mainstream"; Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York, 2020), 12–3; Rymph, *Republican Women*, 232; Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 153.

<sup>139</sup>Kruse and Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, 108–10; Joanne Meyerowitz, *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit* (Princeton, NJ, 2021), 162.

<sup>140</sup>James M. Perry and Michel McQueen, "Bush's 'Thousand Points of Light' Are Flickering with Doubts about Role in Providing Services," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 14, 1989, A16.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

<sup>142</sup>George Gallup, "Gallup Poll: Volunteerism Still Strong in U.S.," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 7, 1982, V2.

<sup>143</sup>"Reagan Honors 18 for Voluntarism," *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1982, D22.

<sup>144</sup>Judy Daubenmier, "Romney an Activist in Voluntarism," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 19, 1989, I4.

<sup>145</sup>George Bush, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans," Aug. 18, 1988, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/268235> (accessed Apr. 9, 2019).

legitimacy and responsibility for achieving progress in the state,” explained an aide.<sup>146</sup> Rather than providing for people’s needs, government should focus on “raising the people’s awareness” that they should give their time and money.<sup>147</sup>

Bush’s critics noted that the “thousand points of light” idea seemed vague and inadequate. A few weeks before he faced off against the Democratic nominee, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, the comedy show *Saturday Night Live* made this point to a national audience in 1988. In a now-classic sketch, actor Dana Carvey played an awkward and rambling Bush in a parody presidential debate. When asked how he would address the problems of homelessness, hunger, and poverty and achieve his “stated goal of making this a kinder, gentler nation,” Carvey-as-Bush responded by expressing regret that the debate format would not give him enough time to answer fully.<sup>148</sup> “All I can say is, we are on the track, we’re getting the job done. We can do more but let’s stay the course. A thousand points of light.”<sup>149</sup> The studio audience burst into laughter as Carvey declared that his own time was up. The moderator, journalist Diane Sawyer played by Jan Hooks, assured Carvey that he had used less than half of his allotted time. Carvey grew flustered as he tried to run out the clock, debating with Hooks about whether his time had ended. Finally he blurted out, “Let me just sum up, on track, stay the course, a thousand points of light. Stay the course.”<sup>150</sup> Next it was Governor Dukakis’ turn, played by Jon Lovitz, who deadpanned: “I can’t believe I’m losing to this guy.”<sup>151</sup>

This skewering did not seem to move Bush, and neither did appeals from nonprofit social service groups. Charity umbrella organization leader Brian O’Connell wrote to the president that his predecessor had starved the public sector and burdened nonprofits with “intolerable expectations” that they could make up the shortfall, then saddled them with “undeserved guilt and blame” when they could not.<sup>152</sup> Bush stuck with Reagan’s strategy of celebrating volunteering while shrinking state provisions. VOLUNTEER and the End Hunger Network co-sponsored a 1989 television event, “Prime Time to End Hunger,” a week of episodes on the three major networks that spotlighted social problems.<sup>153</sup> Popular shows including *Golden Girls*, *Cheers*, and *Head of the Class* all took part. At the end of each episode, viewers saw a 1-900 number they could call, for the cost of \$2, to request information on volunteering. Now the volunteer shouldered the cost of even learning where to pitch in. Bush kicked off the event with a press conference in the White House Rose Garden. End Hunger Network president Jerry Michaud applauded the president’s focus on “getting people involved through volunteerism,” but groups like his “also would like some government funding to go along with volunteerism.”<sup>154</sup> Public officials’ praise flowed freely, but public money did not.

By century’s end, Democrats had mastered the Republicans’ rhetoric and adopted their positions. They, too, wrapped the tenets of personal responsibility, the sanctity of the private sphere, and demonizing people of color and the poor in the saccharine sheen of individual generosity. In the mid-1990s, President Bill Clinton was under pressure from conservatives in Congress and underwater in the polls as he pursued reelection. He completed his predecessors’ mission to gut welfare in 1996 by signing Republicans’ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which burdened recipients with work mandates that trapped

<sup>146</sup>Perry and McQueen, “Bush’s ‘Thousand Points of Light’ Are Flickering With Doubts,” A16.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid.

<sup>148</sup>George Bush Debates Governor Dukakis,” *Saturday Night Live*, season 14, episode 1, Oct. 8, 1988, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N\\_01LySbRnY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_01LySbRnY) (accessed Sept. 18, 2021).

<sup>149</sup>Ibid.

<sup>150</sup>Ibid.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup>Perry and McQueen, “Bush’s ‘Thousand Points of Light’ Are Flickering,” A16.

<sup>153</sup>Diane Haithman, “Big 3 Networks Tackle Social Ills in Support of ‘End Hunger’ Project,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 11, 1989, F1.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid.

them in low-wage jobs and applied strict new rules and time limits.<sup>155</sup> But Clinton also “challenged Americans to unite” around the problem of illiteracy, according to his White House website, and launched AmeriCorps, a community service program that set out to “tackle problems like putting welfare recipients to work.”<sup>156</sup>

These and other volunteer efforts could not meet people’s needs. Welfare “reform” deepened poverty and even forced some recipients into volunteering, as states counted those hours toward the new work requirements. This was doubly the inverse of what Nixon had once proposed: mandating people to volunteer in order to receive their own public support.<sup>157</sup> When welfare recipient and recent college graduate Diana Spatz read news of the PRWORA’s passage in 1996, she recalled, “I hung my head and cried. I felt like I’d crossed a bridge just as it collapsed behind me, and worried what would become of mothers who remained trapped on the other side.”<sup>158</sup>

Volunteerism does not command the same attention it held in the 1970s. Voluntary membership organizations have increasingly been replaced with new kinds of professionally managed advocacy groups that research, lobby, and pursue media attention, and where being involved means writing a check.<sup>159</sup> Prominent figures often describe volunteering as service; both terms emphasize the giver’s generosity over what the receiver deserves. “Service is a lifelong pursuit that strengthens the civic and economic fabric of our nation,” President Barack Obama declared in honoring National Volunteer Week in 2012, an event every president has acknowledged since Nixon established it in 1974.<sup>160</sup> The most prominent advocate of National Volunteer Week is the Points of Light Foundation, which absorbed Nixon’s NCVA (by then re-named the National Volunteer Center Network) in 1991.<sup>161</sup>

Americans are no closer to resolving the issues that animated the volunteering wars, although those issues are still pressing. Today almost every adult must strive to be a breadwinner, working in a demanding job that may or may not be personally fulfilling. Wages have remained low in the feminized, caring fields, even as more white men enter them.<sup>162</sup> Mothers now spend more time each week earning wages and attending to children than they did in the 1960s and feel more societal pressure to be involved parents than fathers do.<sup>163</sup> The state does not meet poor Americans’ needs. Volunteerism remains class-stratified, and the all-volunteer army is disproportionately composed of working-class men and women who see it as their best or perhaps only route into the middle class despite its dangers and sacrifices.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>155</sup>Kruse and Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, 219.

<sup>156</sup>“The Clinton Presidency: National Service and Philanthropy,” Clinton White House Website, Version 5, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://clintonwhitehouse5.archives.gov/WH/Accomplishments/eightyears-12.html> (accessed Sept. 18, 2021).

<sup>157</sup>Ellis and Campbell, *By the People*, 296; Felicia Kornbluh and Gwendolyn Mink, *Ensuring Poverty: Welfare Reform in Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia, 2018), x–xi.

<sup>158</sup>Diana Spatz, “The End of Welfare as I Knew It,” *The Nation*, Dec. 14, 2011, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/end-welfare-i-knew-it/> (accessed Sept. 18, 2021).

<sup>159</sup>Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 206–20.

<sup>160</sup>Eddie Adkins, “Volunteer Week Is When?,” *The NonProfit Times*, Apr. 9, 2012, [https://www.thenonprofit-times.com/npt\\_articles/volunteer-week-is-when/](https://www.thenonprofit-times.com/npt_articles/volunteer-week-is-when/) (accessed Sept. 18, 2021).

<sup>161</sup>“History,” *Points of Light*, <https://www.pointsoflight.org/history/> (accessed Mar. 29, 2021); “Our Mission & Vision,” *Points of Light*, <https://www.pointsoflight.org/about-us/> (accessed Mar. 29, 2021).

<sup>162</sup>Shailla Dewan and Robert Gebeloff, “More Men Enter Fields Dominated by Women,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/21/business/increasingly-men-seek-success-in-jobs-dominated-by-women.html> (accessed Mar. 29, 2021).

<sup>163</sup>A. W. Geiger, Gretchen Livingston, and Kristen Bialik, “6 Facts about U.S. Moms,” Pew Research Center, May 8, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/08/facts-about-u-s-mothers/> (accessed Mar. 29, 2021).

<sup>164</sup>David M. Halbfinger and Steven A. Holmes, “A Nation at War: The Troops; Military Mirrors a Working-Class America,” *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 2003, A1.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has stress tested Americans' ragged social safety net and distorted notions of the worth of caring work. For those who could earn wages remotely, the pandemic dissolved the boundary between home and workplace and multiplied the reproductive labors that women disproportionately shouldered in their families. For those compelled to leave home to work, the pandemic made the feminized labors of cleaning, cooking, and caring more dangerous while exposing how essential yet undervalued those labors are.<sup>165</sup>

Starting in the 1970s, conservatives began to uproot an earlier consensus that the state should help solve social problems. Dislodging that conviction took time, and volunteerism became a powerful tool for this spadework—spadework that Nixon started. By century's end, political leaders from both parties chipped away at the principle that having one's basic needs met was a right rather than a gap someone else might choose to fill.<sup>166</sup> This history underscores the urgency of a broader reckoning about the value of care and the role of the government in providing economic security. Americans should reconsider whether that security should be a right of citizenship rather than the product of someone else's goodwill.

**Katherine Turk** is associate professor of history and adjunct associate professor of women's and gender studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA. She is the author of *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern American Workplace* (2016), which won the Mary Jurich Nickliss Prize from the Organization of American Historians. Her next book, *NOW: The Visionary and Volatile Feminist Organization that Transformed America*, will be published in 2023.

<sup>165</sup>Claire Cain Miller, "Working Moms Are Struggling. Here's What Would Help," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/parenting/government-employer-support-moms.html> (accessed Sept. 19, 2021).

<sup>166</sup>David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), 90; Brian M. Conley, *The Rise of the Republican Right: From Goldwater to Reagan* (New York, 2019), especially 1, 83–4.