

Clinton's photo-op against poverty

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Bill Clinton's two-day anti-poverty tour last week was an exercise in political cynicism. He visited four poverty-stricken areas—Newark, New Jersey; Hartford, Connecticut; Hermitage, Arkansas; and the Englewood section of Chicago—bringing with him sports stars, business executives, Democratic Party politicians and, on his last stop, the Republican Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert. All but lost in the media coverage was the fact that Clinton brought with him no money and no proposals for government programs to combat economic misery.

In Newark, Clinton shared the stage with Rev. Jesse Jackson, Labor Secretary Alexis Herman, New Jersey legislators and members of the New Jersey Nets professional basketball team. Clinton praised the owners of the Nets for investing \$50 million in a trust fund that provides scholarships and other benefits for youth in New Jersey cities. According to a White House aide, by focusing on the Nets' efforts, Clinton is hoping that other pro sports teams will become interested in showing “charitable creativity in the inner city.”

Clinton participated in the opening of an arts education center in Hartford and indicated that he was devoting the last year of his presidency to “keeping the magic economic moment going.” In rural Arkansas he visited the Hermitage Tomato Cooperative Association, founded in 1996 by 15 farmers threatened with bankruptcy, who now supply Burger King and the Kroger Company, among others.

Clinton and Hastert made a joint appearance in Englewood at a technical preparatory school, announcing their agreement on a set of principles that would underlie a “bipartisan legislative initiative on New Markets.” Jesse Jackson, who has launched a program aimed at convincing Chicago businesses and banks to invest in the city's poorest neighborhoods, was on hand again.

This is the second “New Markets” tour undertaken by Clinton in 1999. The first, in July, took him to Kentucky, Mississippi, East St. Louis, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, South Phoenix and the Watts district of Los Angeles. The premise of these visits is that there remain only pockets of poverty in America, bypassed by the booming economy, and these could be eliminated by encouraging corporate investment. Clinton told his audience at Englewood High School last Friday: “My New Markets idea is that we ought to give Americans with money to invest the same incentives to invest in poor areas of America we give them to invest in poor areas of Latin America or Africa or Asia.”

Anyone familiar with conditions in those last-mentioned areas, as well as the business practices of “Americans with money to invest,” can only shudder at Clinton's proposal. It essentially envisions transforming the most deprived American neighborhoods and cities into special “empowerment zones,” in which corporations would be given tax breaks and other incentives to operate low-wage businesses. There is no reason to believe that this would have the slightest impact on the conditions of the poor. A section of minority businessmen, who belong primarily to Clinton's political constituency, would stand to gain from such initiatives.

Along with the notion that the solution to poverty is more capitalism, Clinton suggested that the poor were partly to blame for their own conditions. “For a long time,” he told his Chicago audience, “we were so used to some people being down and out that we acted like we believed it had to be that way. This is a big issue, because all the money in the world and all the good government action in the world can't overcome your lack of faith in yourselves.”

It is noteworthy that Clinton managed to reach an agreement consisting of five points with Hastert and the

Republicans in the House, the same ultra-right group that has been seeking to remove him from office for the past several years. The five points are a neat balance of liberal and right-wing code words. The poor are to be “empowered,” by bringing “capital and new tools to the impoverished urban and rural parts of America,” to “renew their communities and develop new markets of economic opportunity.” The principles exclude any significant government aid, insisting that “solutions need to come from within these distressed communities.”

The conditions in the areas Clinton visited last week constitute an indictment of American capitalism. According to a White House press release, the poverty rate was 30.5 percent in Newark, the largest city in New Jersey, in 1995; in Hartford, one of the largest cities in New England, it was 35.2 percent. The official unemployment rate in Bradley County, Arkansas (in which Hermitage is located) is 9.3 percent, the poverty rate is 20 percent and the median household income is \$21,644. In the Englewood district of Chicago, the median household income is estimated to be about \$19,000, the unemployment rate is 14 percent and about half the population receives food stamps.

These are only the bare statistics. Life for many in Newark, Hartford, large areas of Chicago and other urban centers in the US, as well as countless smaller communities and rural areas, is nightmarish. Poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, drug addiction, lack of access to health care, domestic violence and other ills blight the lives of tens of millions of Americans. These conditions exist and have worsened during what Clinton last week referred to as “the longest economic recovery in peace time in our history.” At the same time, a relatively small percentage of the population has prospered beyond its wildest dreams.

Clinton's “New Markets Tour” is a measure of the lurch to the right in official American political circles. In January 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson announced his War on Poverty. Introducing his first measure, the Economic Opportunity Act, he stated that he was declaring an “unconditional war on poverty.” The measures actually proposed were extremely timid. They included some direct assistance for the poor, in the form of the Food Stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children programs, but a guaranteed annual income and even a national jobs program were rejected

out of hand. Nonetheless, the Johnson administration and Congress at least recognized in words that the federal government had a responsibility to address social conditions.

Today the population is expected to subsist on a diet of tributes paid to the wonders of the free market system. “Nothing we do,” Clinton asserted, “will work without the commitment of the private business sector.” The abandonment of social reformism is the official policy of both major parties.

At a time of record budget surpluses, a stock market boom that has produced fabulous riches, bipartisan banking deregulation that will produce another financial windfall for the elite, Clinton and the political establishment oppose any serious measures to alleviate the most glaring social evils.



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