

# Welfare not only helps the

## Guest column

By Michael Coblenz

It is commonly assumed that governments developed welfare systems simply out of concern for the poor. This is false.

The real purpose was to ensure social stability by preventing the poor from becoming desperate and taking desperate action.

The first modern welfare system was implemented in Germany in the late 1880s by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Europe had been plagued by peasant revolts for hundreds of years, and Bismarck understood that the main cause of these revolts was extreme poverty.

He also understood that the more recent revolutions — France in 1789, much of Central Europe in 1848 — were caused in large part by urbanization and industrialization, and the poverty and hopelessness of the new industrial workers. Such revolts could destroy a country and were bad for everyone in society.

As British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said, “The palace is not safe when the cottage is not happy.”

Bismarck understood that a revolt could tear apart the new German nation he had worked so hard to establish.

To prevent this, he established a welfare system with minimal payments to the elderly, the disabled and the unemployed.

Most European nations soon followed Germany's lead, with one notable exception: Russia, where the revolution of 1917 was caused by the same social forces as the earlier revolutions in Europe.

The communists took advantage of the poverty and desperation of the Russian workers, convincing them that they were exploited by the ruling class. The revolution removed the aristocracy but never improved the lot of the people.

World War I altered many nations' commitment to social welfare. After the war much of Europe experienced severe economic disruption.

Inflation — to pay off war debt — was rampant, particularly in Germany. Unemployment reached record levels. In desperation over their economic hardships, many people were drawn to the simplistic and violent solutions offered by communism and fascism.

The United States did not experience the same social and economic turmoil from industrialization as did Europe. We were a new and growing nation with a constant need for labor, so there was little unemployment. The frontier offered plenty of land; workers were not trapped in the cities.

The country was able to expand and industrialize at the

# table

# e poor but protects society

same time. World War I, which devastated Europe, had a net positive effect on the United States, forcing us onto the world stage both politically and economically. It wasn't until the depression of the 1930s that this country experienced the kind of economic hardships that had plagued Europe for hundreds of years.

Faced with a crippled economy and extreme unemployment, President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew the government had to do something to prevent social disruption. The situation in Europe was well known, and there were growing communist and fascist movements in this country as well.

FDR and his advisers felt the best way to prevent the spread of fascism or communism, and possibly to avoid a revolution, was to help the poor. Small payments to the poor and unemployed would keep them from becoming socially disruptive.

The programs developed in the New Deal were designed to help the poor but their underlying purpose was to ensure the stability of society. The title of the main program reveals this purpose: "Social Security" (not "Individual Old Age Security").

Effectively, welfare was a bribe to placate the poor, and to keep them from engaging in the types of socially disruptive behavior that was so common in Europe. The government could not sell these programs to the public based on this logic so they were presented as altruistic efforts to aid poor people.

These programs were widely popular and soon the government was doing more and more to help people. Over the years the focus shifted, and the purpose became helping individuals rather than protecting society.

Most of the expansion of welfare programs in the 1960s was motivated by a desire to improve the lot of the poor. The previous concern for social stability was forgotten.

The current system is inefficient and needs serious reform. But it has achieved its original goal. There have been no bread riots, no peasant revolts, and neither fascism nor communism has achieved widespread support in this country.

As the system is reformed, the European experience and the original purpose should be kept in mind. Extremely poor people become desperate and often take desperate action. Therefore, while the government largess should be cut, there must be some minimal support for the poorest in our country.

Even if the poor should work and provide for themselves, something must be done to prevent them from becoming so impoverished that they become desperate and socially disruptive. This must be done not only to help the poor, but to protect our society.

---

■ Michael Coblenz is an attorney in Spokane. He first came to the Spokane area as a B-52 navigator stationed at Fairchild Air Force Base. He attended Gonzaga Law School after leaving the military.