Sometimes truth and power sing in harmony. Sometimes they don’t. President Bush’s call for a faith-based approach to welfare brings into sharp relief the possible clash between truth and power. The war on poverty initiated by President Johnson in 1964 has not gone well, despite massive increases in appropriations for poverty-related programs. Prior to President Johnson’s war, poverty had been dropping steadily in America as a natural result of economic progress. Since then, however, poverty has changed little despite continued economic progress.

There is good reason for the persistence of poverty. President Johnson’s war was premised on the belief that there was no social problem that more money couldn’t cure. Poverty was treated simply as being a lack of income. It was taken as axiomatic that people would use their talents to the best of their abilities. Poverty did not result from bad choices, but from the absence of choice. After all, someone born with deformed hands will never become a surgeon or a quarterback.

There is clearly some poverty that reflects an absence of choice. There are some people who will be poor even though they apply their talents wisely and energetically. Poverty can arise through being on the short end of one of Nature’s involuntary lotteries. Chance is ubiquitous in all of our lives, starting with the family situations into which we are born. Those born into loving,
nurturing homes will get a better start in life than will those born into indifferent or malevolent homes.

One of the striking features about poverty, however, is how rare it is among people who have graduated from high school and have avoided having children until marriage and after graduation. These are not difficult conditions to meet. A failure to meet them is mostly a matter of choice, a bad choice perhaps, but a choice nonetheless. To be sure, there are different kinds of poverty-promoting choices. People can choose directly to be poor, as it were, as through foregoing a full-time job to have more time for fishing, or in refusing to attend evening classes three nights a week for six months to qualify for a steady job. They can also do so indirectly as a by-product of other choices, as in getting pregnant and dropping out of school at 16.

Hillary Clinton was right in asserting that it takes a village to raise a child. She was wrong only in her presumption that a village functions most effectively with government at its center. The plain fact of the matter is that poverty is more a matter of limited character than of limited income. The limited income is mostly simply a consequence of the limited character. The direction of causation runs from character to income, and not from income to character.

How can character be strengthened? In *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, George Will argued that governments are inescapably involved in the shaping the character. Indeed they are, and for bad as well as good. Starting with President Johnson’s War on Poverty, America came to adopt a type of guaranteed income for everyone, through a variety of programs by which people on welfare could
receive roughly the equivalent of what they could make by working full time for around the minimum wage.

It is doubtful that government can do a good job of moral instruction in shaping character in a productive manner. Public assistance must be impersonal and bureaucratic, for requirements of fair treatment must be expressible through objective rules and procedures. Such an approach is not suitable for making discriminating judgments about who genuinely would use a helping hand profitably and who is simply looking for a handout.

The moral instruction necessary for the formation of productive character traits is far better accomplished through the various private institutions that would play a leading role in President Bush’s faith-based approach. Indeed, this was how welfare in America was mostly organized prior to its takeover by government in the aftermath of the Great Depression.

One sizeable defect of the President’s approach is that government would continue to collect high taxes, only it would channel some of that money through private rather than state agencies. The federal government has often used grants as an instrument to intrude on a wide range of activities for which it has no constitutional mandate. There is no good reason to think it would be different in this case. Power may corrupt truth. It would be far better simply to reduce taxes still further, and let the private agencies of civil society reassert their prominence in moral instruction and character formation within our society.