Review of *The Failed Welfare Revolution: America's Struggle over the Guaranteed Income Policy*, Brian Steensland. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2008

Review by Karl Widerquist

Hard as it is to believe today, there was a brief period when the United States government seemed inevitably bound to adopt of some form of guaranteed income. The idea seemed to emerge from nowhere in the mid-1960s, when it was suddenly discussed by most major political actors. President Nixon proposed a water-down version of the guaranteed income, which overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives, only to be narrowly defeated in the Senate. The idea continued to be discussed during the Ford and Carter administrations, but by 1980 it was out of mainstream politics.

Brian Steensland is a professor of sociology at the University of Indiana. His new book, *the Failed Welfare Revolution: America's Struggle over the Guaranteed Income Policy*, chronicles the history of the guaranteed income movement of the 1960s and 70s, examining how and why it sprang up so suddenly, took on its heir of inevitability, and as quickly disappeared from the political mainstream.

Steensland's work is extremely thorough. He seems to have found every speech and article by every politician, pundit, columnist, union leader, nonprofit director, and political activist, who ever spoke or wrote on the issue. He discusses the internal squabbles of the Nixon administration from which the administration's version coalesced into "the Family Assistance Plan." He reports on which Senators and Representatives supported or opposed the bill in committee, who changed their mind, when and why. His thoroughness makes the book tough going at times, but serves a worthy purpose. Steensland paints a vivid picture. Reading this book I feel like I know what happened, what went wrong, and what opportunities were lost.

The guaranteed income emerged in policy circles in the mid-1960s as the confluence of several events, among them the growth in political attention to poverty, the belief that something must be done about the welfare system to help reduce poverty, and the endorsement of the guaranteed income by widely divergent policy experts. The guaranteed income briefly became the consensus view of economists, who put it forward as the scientific solution to poverty. The guaranteed income faced the opportunity that it might be able to attract broad support from both left and right. For those on the left, the guaranteed income offered greater freedom and less supervision for the poor and a breakdown of the distinction between the so-called deserving and undeserving poor. For those on the right, it offered greater incentives for people receiving public assistance to enter the labor force and greater support for the working poor—usually believed to be the most deserving of all.

Instead, the Family Assistance plan managed to alienate critics of the welfare system from both left and right. Many welfare-rights activists viewed the plan as a reduction in welfare benefits for the most needy; and many conservatives viewed it as a major expansion of the number of people "on the welfare rolls." The defeat stemmed largely from Nixon's failure to capture the rhetoric. His speeches largely played into the hands of the plan's opponents. Even so, the defeat was extremely narrow. Had Nixon been willing to expend more political capital on it, to make the right promises, and to twist the right arms, he may well have gotten it through the Senate in 1970. Instead critics of the plan took the initiative and created new policies, such as the Earn Income Tax Credit, that incorporated some aspects of Family Assistance Plan, but reinforced the distinction between the so-called deserving and undeserving poor.

By the late 1970s the opportunity was gone. The "welfare mess" remained a political concern, but poverty did not. By the time Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, poverty was no longer seen as a problem in need of a better solution. The welfare system was seen as the problem, and the most popular solution was for government to do less to address poverty.