

# Poor Women, Poor Choices:

## The Dilemma of Civil Rights and Women's Health in the 1970s

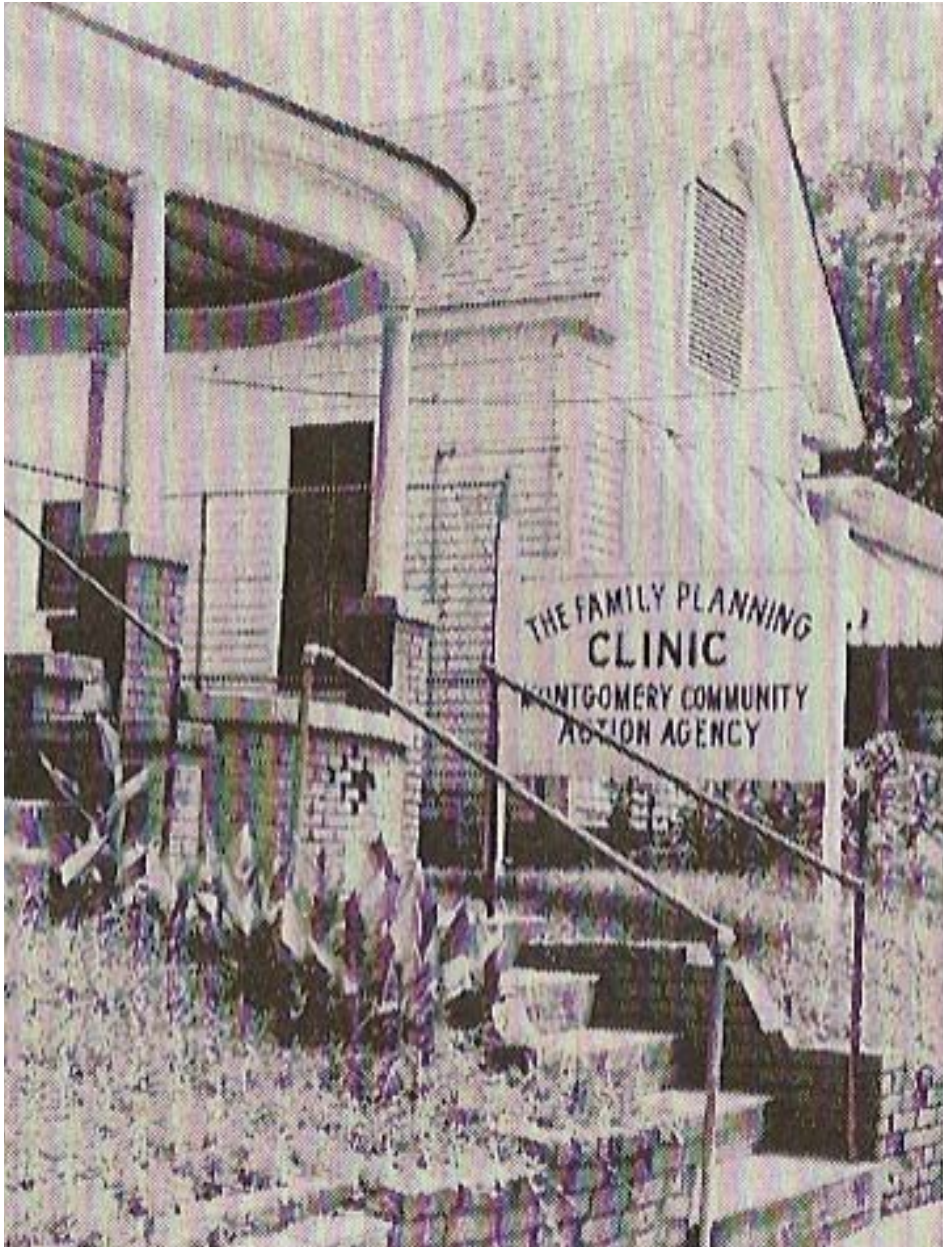
Gregory Michael Dorr, Ph.D.

Visiting Scholar, Center for the Study of Diversity in Science,  
Technology, and Medicine, M.I.T.



**Mrs. Minnie Relf**

**Mr. Lonnie Relf**



**MCAC Clinic, 1973**



**Mary Alice Relf, 12**

**Minnie Lee Relf, 14**

INFORMATION FOR SPERM DONATION

NAME Minnie Lee Relf ROOM BED HOSPITAL NO. DATE June 13, 1973 DOCTOR A. E. Thomas

We, the undersigned, Minnie Lee Relf and being over 21 years of age, request Dr. A. E. Thomas and assistants of his choice to perform upon myself (the wife) the following operations: Tubal Ligation and to administer any anesthesia. It has been explained to us that this operation is intended to result in sterility. I understand that a sterile person is NOT capable of becoming a parent. We also understand that the operation may not result in sterility and that no guarantee of sterility has been given to us.

We voluntarily request the operation and understand that, if it proves successful, the results may be permanent and, if they are, it will be impossible for the patient to conceive or bear children.

WITNESSES: Martha J. Ware Daughter Minnie Relf; Cynette Lacey Mother Minnie Relf (Her mark)

STATE OF ALABAMA MONTGOMERY COUNTY

I, Reginald Nessmith certify that Minnie Relf and Minnie Lee Relf appeared before me this 13th day of June, 1973 and voluntarily signed the foregoing instrument.

Reginald Nessmith Notary Public MY COMMISSION EXPIRES JUNE 30, 1974

INFORMATION FOR SPERM DONATION

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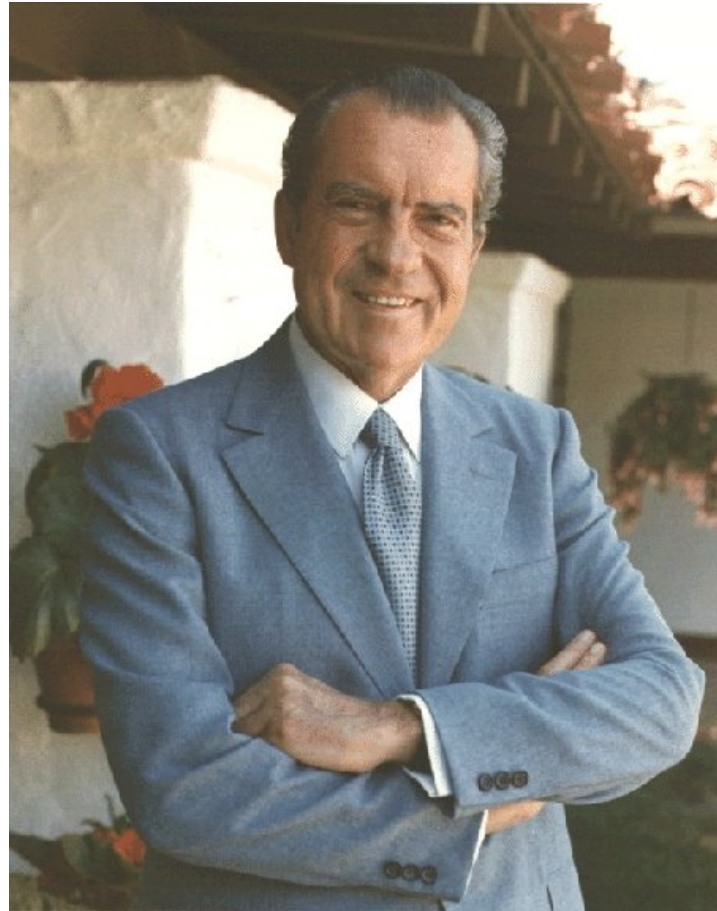
Reginald Nessmith Notary Public MY COMMISSION EXPIRES JUNE 30, 1974



The New York Times/Gary Settle

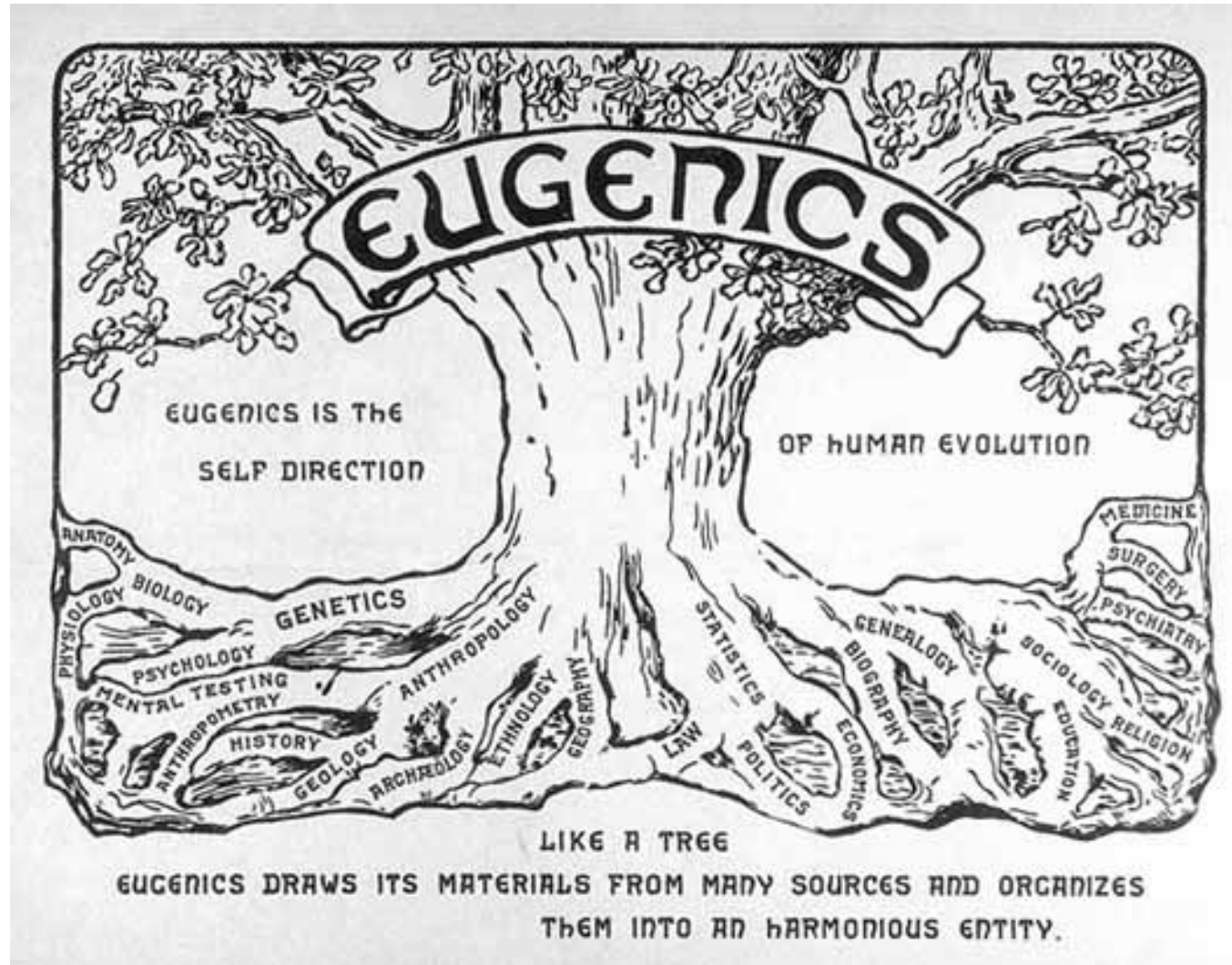
Morris Dees, Mary Alice Relf, and Minnie Relf (July, 1973)

# Why *Relf v. Weinberger* Matters:



## Population Anxiety and the Presidency

# Why *Relf v. Weinberger* Matters:



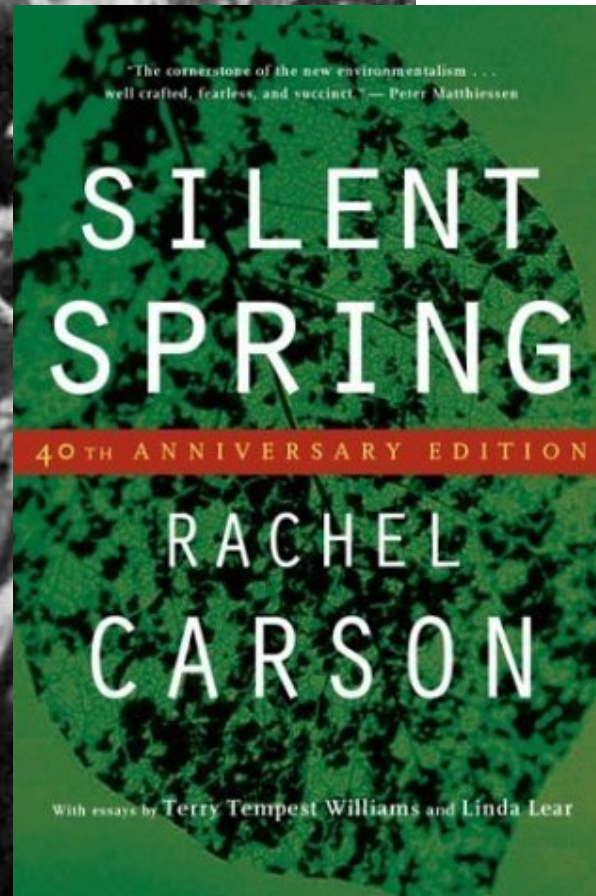
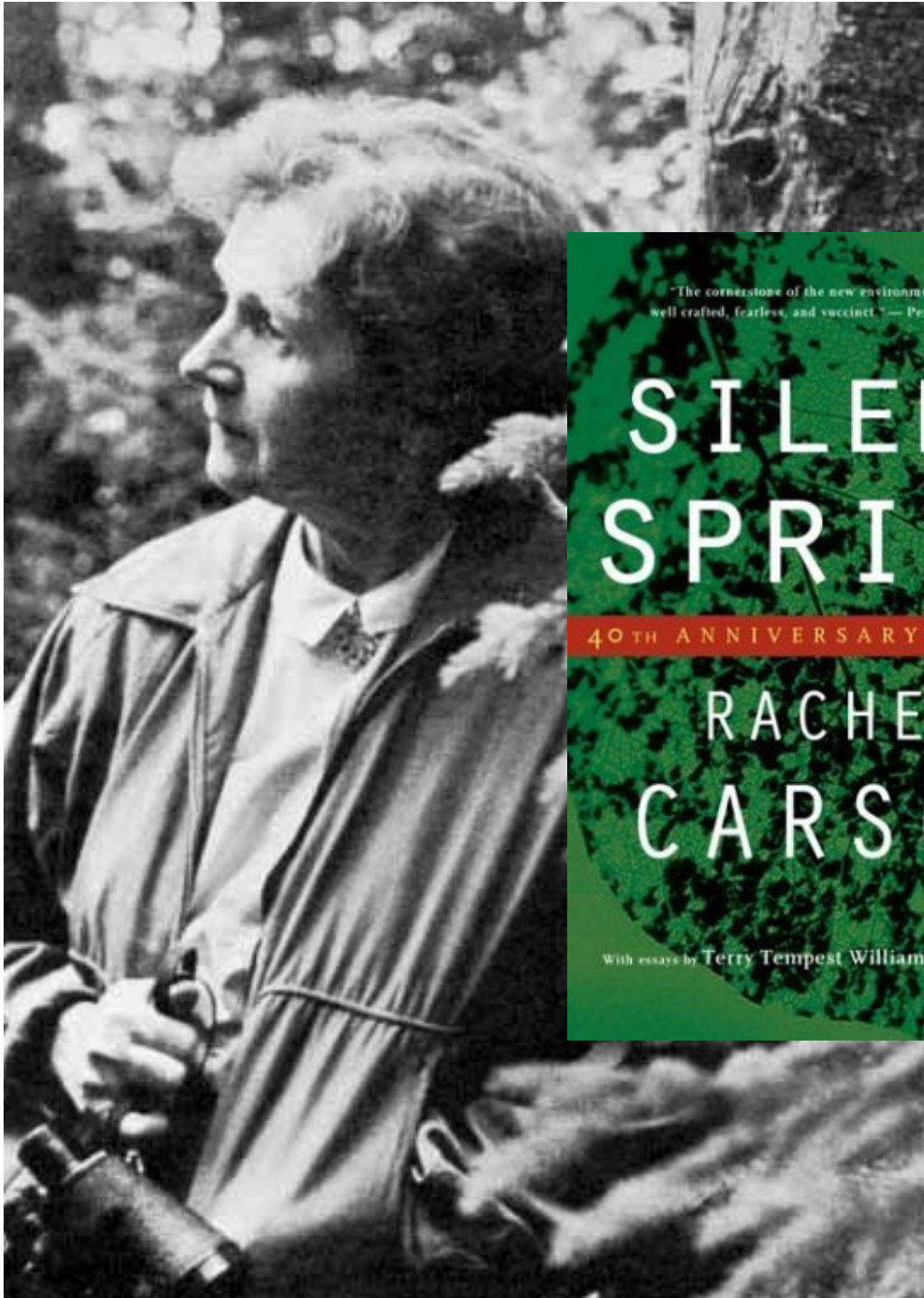
## Persistence of Eugenic Ideology

# Why *Relf v. Weinberger* Matters:



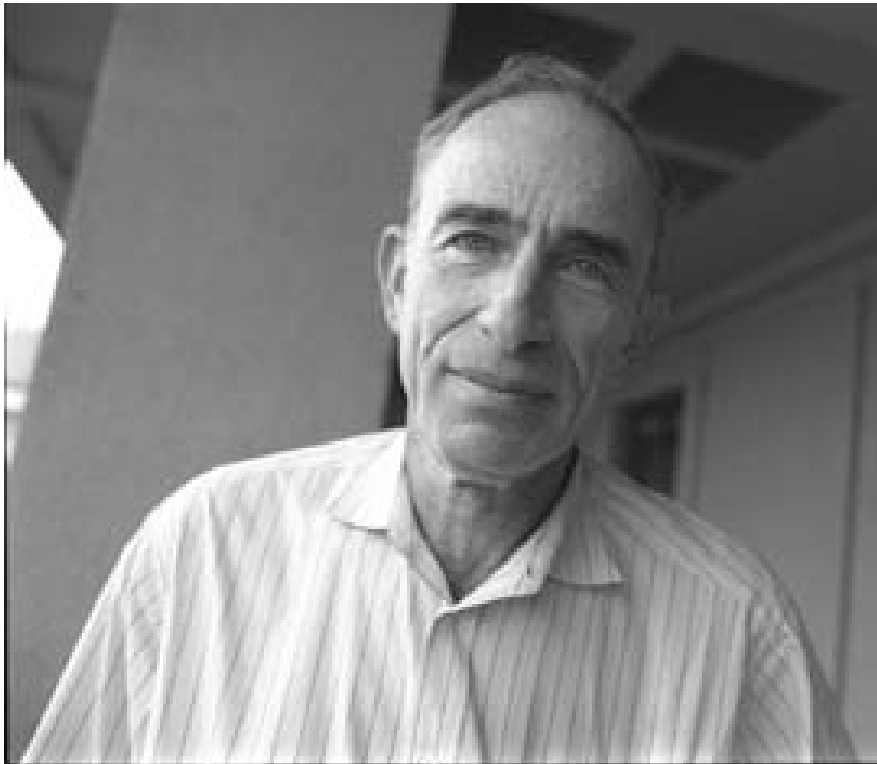
Relationship to the Tuskegee Experiment



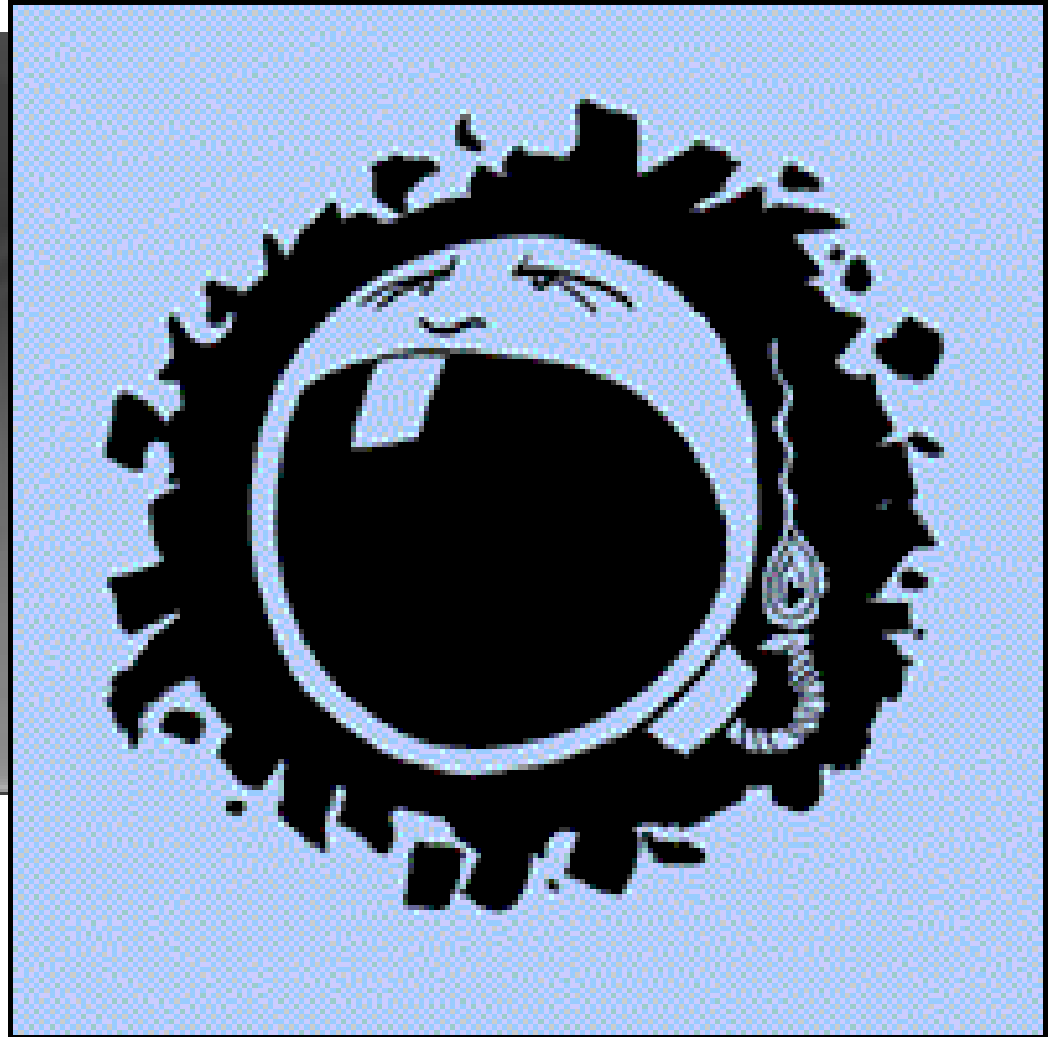


Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (1962)

# Population Politics



Paul Ehrlich, Stanford biologist, author,  
*The Population Bomb* (1968)

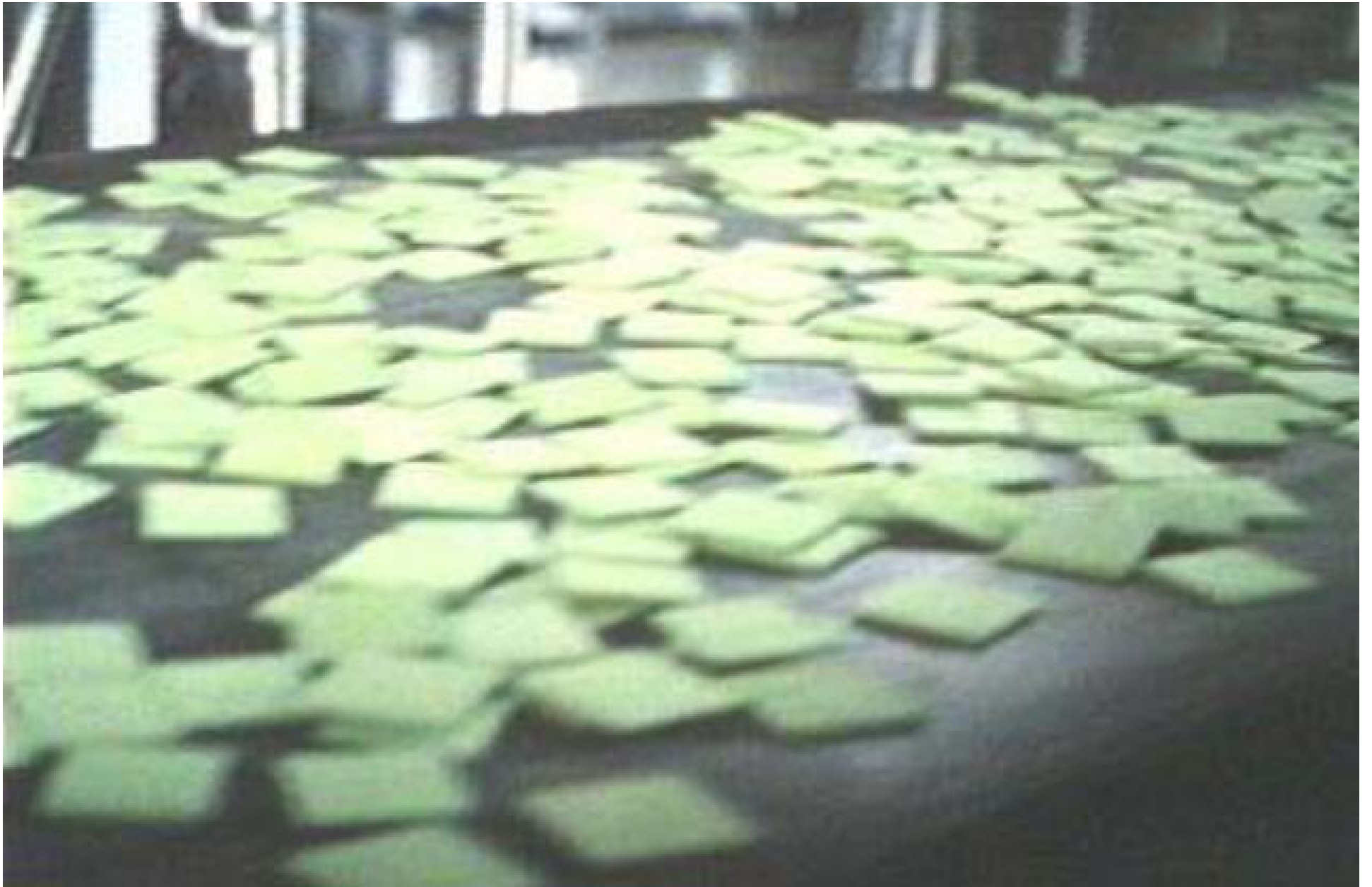


ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK

# SOYLENT GREEN



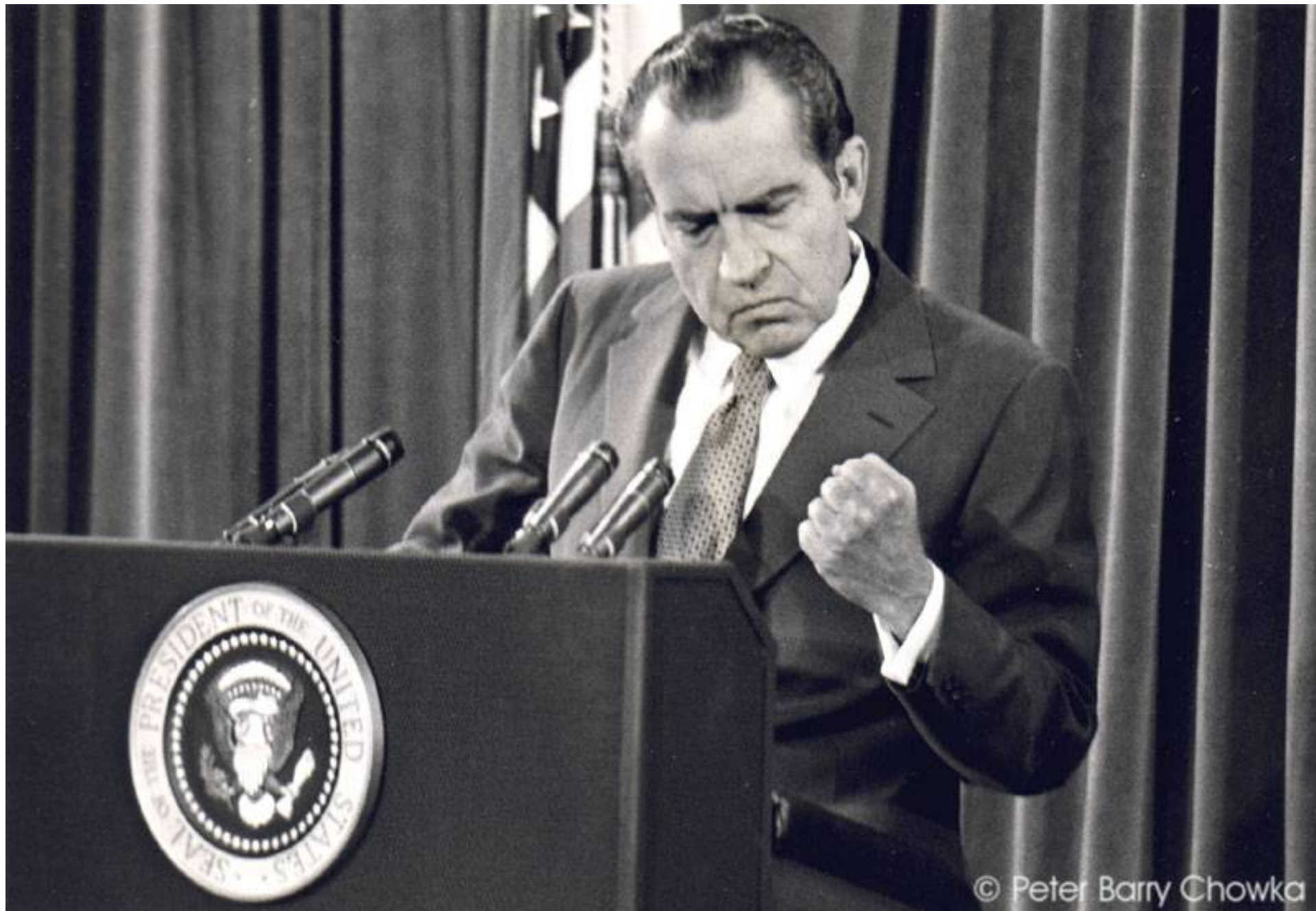
FSM TELEVISION AGE CLASSICS



# Watts Riot, Los Angeles, 1965



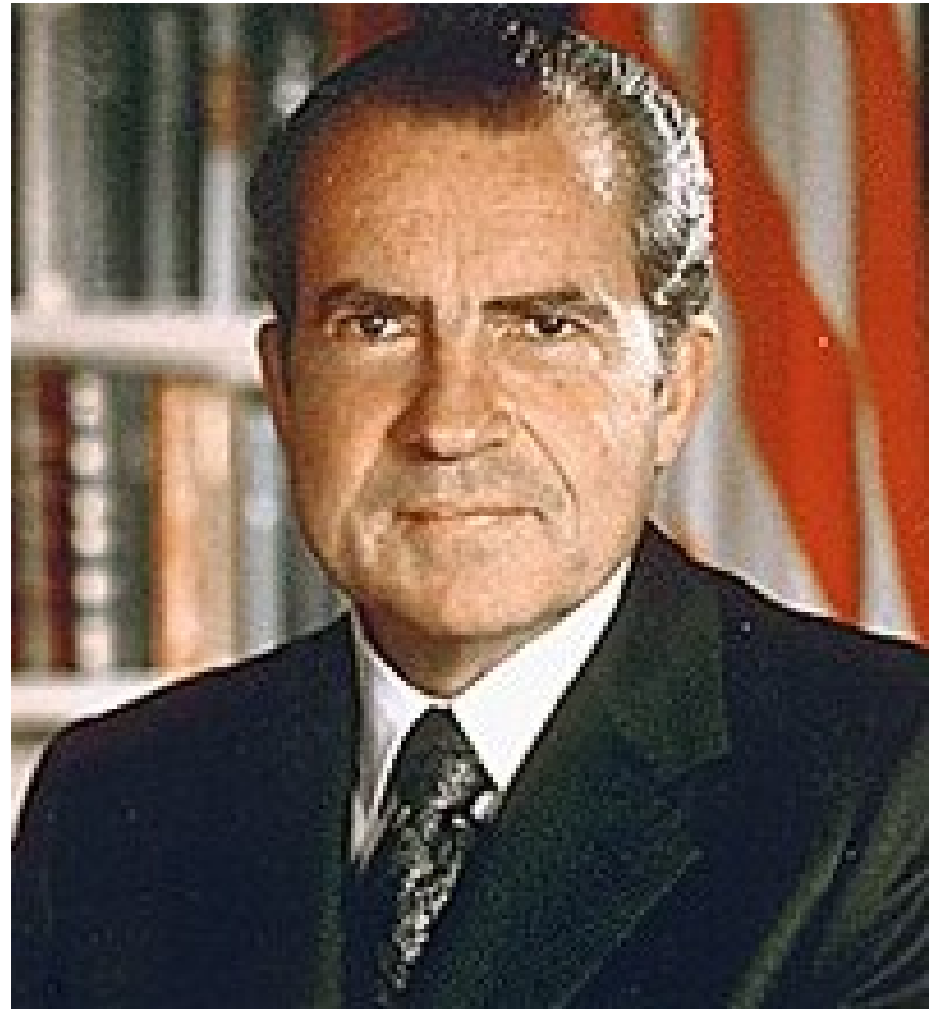
Corbis.com



President Richard M. Nixon, The White House, June, 1972

# Nixon's Population Policy

- Family Planning and Population Research Act (1970)
- Responds to population and welfare activists
- Set preconditions for sterilization abuse



Oct 10, 1972





**“Now we know that ... some of them were hiring goon squads and others were using the power of their public office for blackmail and extortion. Phillips ... hasn’t been connected with that stuff. No, he was handing out money from his agency to pay for the sterilization of black children. By comparison to Phillips, the Deans, the Colsons and the Magraders look almost good....[T]his revelation may explain Richard Nixon’s opposition to abortion. There was a better plan....the New Federalism’s final solution to race and poverty in America.”**

**--*The Washington Post*, 4 July 1973**

# Eugenics, Alabama, and the Road to *Relf*



Vernon Merritt/LIFE

- “Sterilization of the retarded had its precedent in Nazi Germany. This whole thing is a horrendous attack on privacy.”
  - Julian Bond,  
President, Southern Poverty Law Center

## Eugenics, Alabama, and the Road to *Relf*

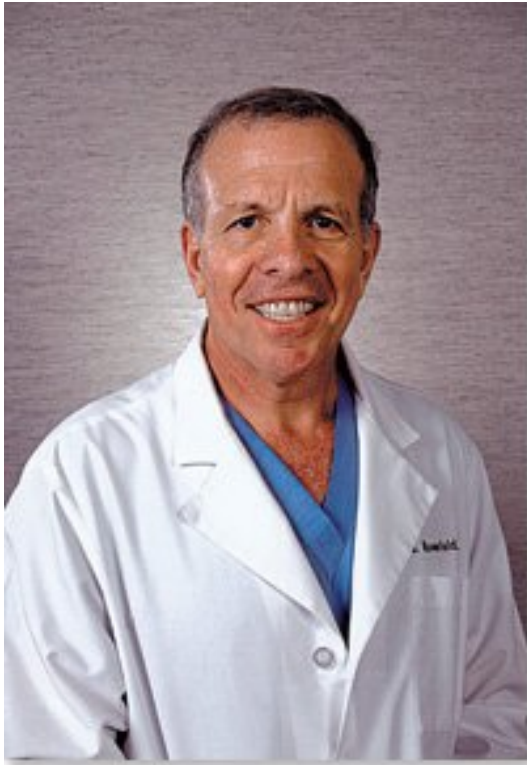
“Both the humanitarian and economic aspects of this eugenics question are so gigantic as to attract the interests of all; and especially should this whole question of human betterment via the eugenic sterilization route make a peculiar and lasting appeal to every physician.”

-- James Norment Baker, M.D.



**Nial Cox-Ramirez was  
sterilized in Plymouth.**

# Eugenics, Alabama, and the Road to *Relf*



Bernard Rosenfeld,  
M.D., Ph.D.

“It is probable that of the two million people who undergo surgical sterilization each year, at least several hundred thousand are considerably less than well-informed about the irreversibility, risks, and alternative methods of family planning when they ‘decide’ to have these operations.”

– Health Research Group,  
division of Public Citizen



Ralph Nader

***Relf v. Weinberger***  
***Wyatt v. Aderholt***  
***Tuskegee Experiment***



***Informed Consent***  
***Social Eugenics***



***Protection or Control?***

# Protection or Control?

- “It’s always the patient’s choice.”  
-- Orelia Dixon, Director, MCAC

# Protection or Control?

- “We’ve had the Relfs as clients for more than five years, and for the longest time I was trying to explain that the two elder girls should have their tubes tied....The family always refused.”
  - African-American nurse,  
Montgomery County Health Department



# Nurse Eunice Rivers



# Protection or Control?

- “White folks say do, come, go don’t and black folks do, come, go, and don’t....”  
--*Jet Magazine*,  
“GENOCIDE: Black Youngsters are Sterilized by Alabama Agency”



U.S. District Court Judge  
Frank M. Johnson

*Wyatt v. Stickney* (1970;  
finally dismissed 2003)

*Wyatt v. Aderholt* (1973)

“...[an] integratin’,  
scalawaggin’, carpetbaggin’,  
bald-faced lying federal  
judge...who deserves a  
barbed-wire enema.”  
-- Gov. George Wallace  
(1977)



Gerhard A. Gesell, Esq. (1963)

# Judge Gerhard A. Gesell

- **“Surely the Federal Government must move cautiously in this area....The line between family planning and eugenics is murky.” (1974)**



# Too Many Babies, Too Many Barriers

## Poor Women Seeking Sterilization Face a Maze of Red Tape

TWP 2/19/1998

By Cindy Loose  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Between contractions, Linda Parrish of Southeast Washington begged the obstetrician to tie her tubes. This was her fifth child, and she didn't want any more.

As required by Medicaid rules, she had filled out the forms consenting to sterilization at least 30 days in advance. Now, about to have a Caesarean section, she pleaded for the promised tubal ligation, which could be done at the same time. "I'm a grown woman," she told the doctor. "It's my right."

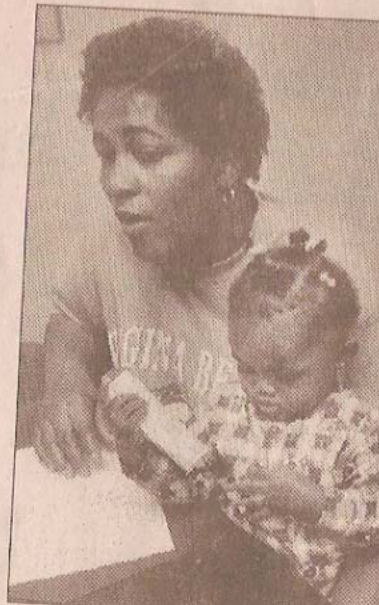
But in her rush to the hospital, Parrish had left behind her copy of the Medicaid consent form, so the doctor declined to perform the operation.

Three times since that birth, Parrish has repeated the procedures required by Medicaid. But again,

she has met roadblocks. She is now pregnant with her ninth child.

Her problems accessing sterilization—the most frequently used form of birth control, outpacing even the pill—are common among poor women. A National Institutes of Health study in 1990 found that of 1,200 pregnant women on Medicaid who filled out the forms to be sterilized, only 59 percent actually were. The main reason for the failure: "bureaucratic and institutional barriers."

Anecdotal evidence also abounds. Workers in programs fighting infant mortality in the District cite, among many, the homeless mother of six who at age 25 was told she was too young to be sterilized. Or the crack-addicted mother of seven who sometimes gets



THE WASHINGTON POST

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1998

## Poor Mothers Find Bureaucracy a Barrier to Sterilization

From A1

at the delivery is not considering the second. I've tried to protect poor people and their children," said Anna, a professor of Columbia University. The irony is that the barriers to poor people are often the same—requiring 30 days and two weeks to make decisions. The law was made by Congress from advocates who were horrified by the idea of coercing women to be sterilized. As a federal court ruled last year, 100,000 women were sterilized annually, many of them coerced into losing their



Rachel Johnson, with children Alyshia Johnson and Anthony Simms Jr., wanted a tubal ligation but used a hospital that does not perform it. Now employed, she has been told that once her insurance begins, she will have no trouble being sterilized.

stitute. Sixty-two percent of the unintended pregnancies are terminated through abortion.

For poor women, federal funding for abortions ended in 1976.

And among poor women, the rate of unplanned pregnancies is even higher: 75 percent, in part because they have twice as many birth control failures, according to institute research. When they seek sterilization, said Columbia's Davidson, "their history tells them they have not been effective in controlling their fertility and they are making a rational choice."

Linda Parrish, for instance, had tried the pill, but one version gave her a blood clot and another caused her to hemorrhage. That ruled out all chemical-based methods.

Asked whether she had considered abstinence, Parrish replied obliquely, saying that the father of her last seven children is still very much a part of her and her children's lives and that she wishes him to continue to be involved.

Abstinence is the chosen method of only 2 percent of all women using some contraceptive method, according to a study funded by the National Center for Health Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

and has been told that once her insurance coverage begins, she will have no problem finding a doctor to do the procedure.

Medicaid rules prohibit the sterilization of anyone younger than 21, no matter how many children the person has. Many doctors feel uneasy about sterilizing women who are significantly older.

"Women with little education have their last desired births much earlier than college-educated women," Davidson said. "But the decision whether to do the procedure may be made by a 27-year-old resident [physician] whose friends haven't even started childbearing. From his point of view, sterilization seems a premature decision."

### Other Implications

Sterilization carries ethical and religious implications as well.

"There are a number of women around who would want to engage in sexual activity without bearing children, and sterilization for that purpose raises a whole set of moral questions," said John Cavanaugh O'Keefe of the American Life League, an anti-abortion education organization.