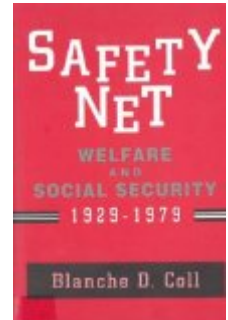**Blanche D. Coll.** *Safety Net: Welfare and Social Security, 1929-1979.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995. xvi + 347 pp. $47.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-2159-6.

Reviewed by Raymond Richards

Given President Bill Clinton's decision to end welfare as we know it, *Safety Net* is a topical work. Blanche D. Coll, a consultant and historian living in Washington, D.C., who has worked for the federal government since 1946, describes the rise and decline of one of the programs started by the 1935 Social Security Act.

She begins by telling how the act began federal subsidies to states for mothers' pensions, called Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). While the federal government struggled to set standards, problems plagued the program from the start. States often helped only "nice" families. Black families suffered from the racism of administrators. Payments were usually small. The attacks on ADC increased during the 1950s. The suspicion that beneficiaries were immoral was voiced more loudly, eligibility was made tougher, talk of a "welfare mess" increased. Although the prosperity of the 1960s boosted the welfare rolls, calls came for beneficiaries to be forced to work. Known after 1962 as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the program generated far more debate than its fraction of the federal budget warranted.

Coll's history peters out after discussing the defeat in the Finance Committee of President Richard Nixon's effort to replace AFDC with his Family Assistance Plan. In 1996 we have seen the principles of the original program abandoned.

Far from being a "comprehensive history of modern welfare in the United States", *Safety Net* is a book for specialists. It describes the complex administration of ADC and AFDC, detailing the world of agencies, requirements, and procedures. The book needs a glossary to explain the many acronyms.

The most serious limitation of the work is that Coll describes the swirl of administration with little context. Readers seeking a discussion of demographic, political, economic, or social influences on policies will be disappointed. The book is parochial, very much the product of someone who has worked in the federal government of the United States for decades. The fact that Coll is not an academic historian shows. She writes without addressing the historiographical issues discussed by Jill Quadagno, Theda Skocpol, and others.[1] Coll's effort thus compiles information, but does

not analyze its meaning in any depth. When she does try to interpret the significance of events, the results are often disappointing. For example, she claims that "Statistically defined, a welfare state exists when government expenditures for all types of goods and services targeted on the needy reaches 8-10 percent of GNP" (p. 205). Of course, welfare states are of many kinds. Under Coll's definition, countries with universal entitlements are not welfare states.

Problems with grammar (as in the above quotation) and citations also detract from the book. For example, an unattributed block quote is soon followed by this nonsentence: "Percentage cuts could be made without fear of legal challenge under the appropriation section of the act that enabled each state to furnish financial assistance to aged needy individuals, 'as far as practicable under the conditions in such State,' and to the silence of the act regarding standards of assistance payments" (p. 97).

Still, for any scholar wishing to master the details of the administration of AFDC from its origins in 1935 until its besiegement in the 1970s, *Safety Net* provides much data. The recent repeal of the program gives us a new appreciation of the world Coll describes, and of the political weakness of the poor.

Note

[1]. Jill Quadagno, *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton University Press, 1988); Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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