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# How the ‘Welfare Queen’ Was Born

The woman behind a pernicious and racist myth didn’t represent anyone or anything but her own striking criminal enterprise.

**By Josh Levin**

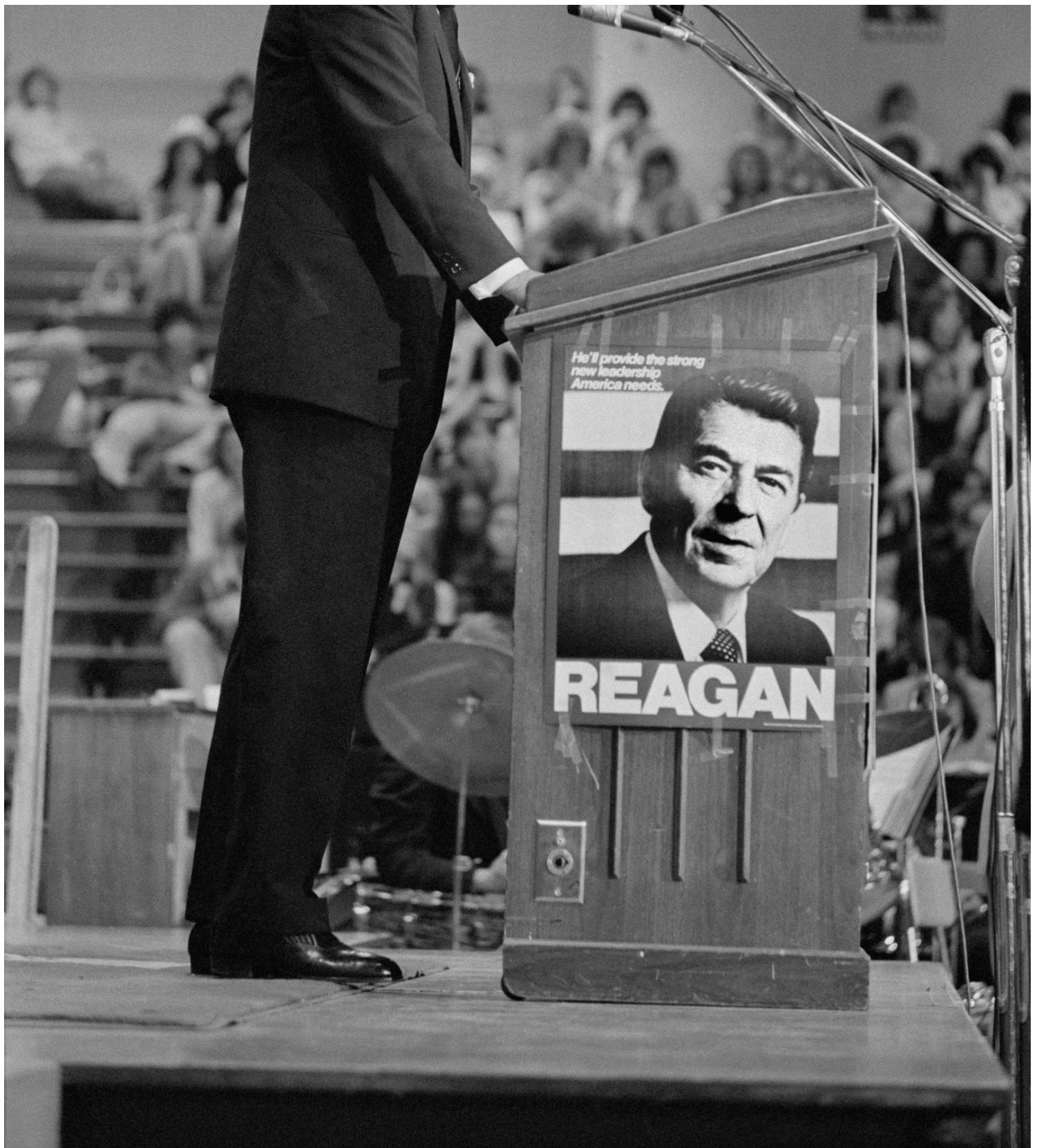
Mr. Levin is the author of “*The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth*. ”

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In the fall of 1974, The Chicago Tribune anointed Linda Taylor the “welfare queen,” reporting that she received public aid checks and food stamps while driving a Cadillac and planning a Hawaiian vacation. An Illinois bureaucrat declared that Taylor was responsible for “the most massive case of welfare fraud that has ever been perpetrated in the 50 states.” Ronald Reagan then shone a spotlight on Taylor and her crimes, asserting during his 1976 presidential run that she used 80 aliases and that “her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year.” In a recording of one campaign event, you can hear the crowd emit a collective gasp when Reagan recites that enormous dollar figure.

Linda Taylor became the living template for a racist stereotype: the greedy black woman getting rich off taxpayer money. That vicious, baseless caricature demonized some of the nation’s most vulnerable people, laying the groundwork for bipartisan welfare reforms that slashed direct aid to the poor. And the Taylor-inspired trope continues to haunt our political conversation, as elected officials claim that aid programs are plagued by fraud and call for food stamp recipients to be banned from purchasing “luxury” items like lobster. (There is no evidence that people who get food stamps eat a disproportionate amount of lobster.)





Ronald Reagan, trying to build on the racist stereotype, asserted during his 1976 presidential run that “her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year.” Bettmann Archive, via Getty Images

While the welfare queen stereotype endured, Linda Taylor herself has been totally forgotten. At the height of her infamy in the mid-1970s, Taylor wasn't just depicted as a brazen thief. She was seen as a shape-shifter, a woman who used dozens of aliases and her own racial ambiguity to abet her scams. “Her skin is sallow — like a medium yellow — and she has no features that make her peculiar to any racial background,” a detective explained in one national news item about Taylor. “So she passes as a Filipino. She puts on a black wig and becomes a Negro, and with other makeup and wigs, she passes for white.” Another article said that Taylor, who in the 1970s self-identified as black, was able to pass for “Spanish, Filipino, [and] white.”

As I researched Taylor's life decades later, I discovered that much of what had been said about her was inaccurate, misleading, or worse. Taylor, who died in obscurity in 2002, hadn't actually pilfered \$150,000 in welfare money in a single year. Her take was estimated at \$40,000 over many years, and she was officially charged with stealing around \$9,000. And welfare fraud, it turned out, was the least of her crimes. Taylor was a known kidnapper, and in the 1970s and 1980s, three people she'd become close to ended up dead under suspicious circumstances. Those disturbing incidents were never adequately investigated. The press, politicians, and government officials saw Taylor as the country's biggest welfare cheat. Nothing else she'd done, no matter how heinous, could overpower that image.

At least one part of the Linda Taylor legend was true: She had no fixed identity, and she changed her name and appearance constantly. Taylor had picked up that habit from an early age. As a child in the Deep South, the color of her skin had marked her as a target, someone whose very existence was seen as a shameful mistake.

Taylor's mother, Lydia Mooney, was white, and her family came from Cullman County, Ala., an area where white separatism was official policy. In 1908, a pair of small newspapers reported that the county seat was “the only strictly white town in North Alabama, if not in the entire state.” In the 1930s, a black newspaper in Virginia wrote that black “motorists buy all the gasoline their cars can hold in order not to have to stop at Cullman for any purpose.”

Lydia left her home in Alabama when she was 17. Her husband, who she'd married when she was 14, later filed for divorce, accusing her of infidelity. Lydia's daughter Martha — the future Linda Taylor — was born in 1926, in a tiny town on the banks of Mississippi River called Golddust, Tenn. While no county or state record was issued to mark the child's arrival, Lydia's family whispered that the child had been the product of an affair, and that the father was a black man.

I don't know if Taylor ever met her father or knew her father's family. I did learn that her parentage made her a nonperson in the eyes of many of her white relatives. One of her mother's brothers refused to let Taylor set foot inside his home. A first cousin also remembered seeing Taylor sitting in a car, alone, during a big family gathering — none of her relatives spoke to her, and she didn't speak to any of them.

Taylor wasn't just denied feelings of kinship and family connections. She was deprived of an education. In a court hearing in the 1960s, Taylor's aunt would testify that her niece “didn't go to no school I went to.” Taylor's older sister Mary Jane, who had two white parents, did have the opportunity to spend time in a classroom.

While Taylor's family didn't let her forget her heritage, they did their best to obscure it publicly. Not long after Taylor was born, her mother and her stepfather, J.J. Miller, moved to Mississippi County, Ark., to find work planting and picking cotton. In both 1930 and 1940, Taylor was marked as white on the census, just like the rest of the Millers. This government-adjudged racial purity affirmed that the Millers were law-abiding citizens. Arkansas law at the time banned the “cohabitation of persons of the Caucasian race and of the Negro race, whether open or secret.” According to a state statute, “Any woman who shall have been delivered of a mulatto child, the same shall be *prima facie* evidence of guilt without further proof and shall justify a conviction of the woman.” If Taylor had been declared a “Negro,” her mother would have been guilty of a felony.

When she became a young adult, Taylor traveled the same road as millions of other black Americans, leaving the South for a locale that was reputedly more equitable. Taylor landed in the Bay Area during the World War II shipbuilding boom. But while California was often depicted as a place full of opportunity and relatively free of prejudice, the reality often didn't live up to that dreamy vision. Taylor found herself in a rat-infested apartment building in West Oakland. She was arrested multiple times in the mid-1940s for prostitution-related offenses.

In California, as in Arkansas, Taylor hid her racial identity. In March 1948 — six months before the Supreme Court of California declared the state's miscegenation ban unconstitutional — she married a man with German ancestry. Their marriage license identified Taylor as Hawaiian, a fiction that allowed her to account for the color of her skin while still conforming to the government's parameters for whiteness.

That marriage wouldn't last, nor would her stint in California. She eventually moved to Chicago, managing to blend in for a time while living in the predominantly white neighborhood of Lincoln Park. But in 1964, Taylor chose to pursue an outlandish, risky gambit, claiming that she was the daughter of a black gambling kingpin and the rightful heir to his substantial fortune. Taylor didn't assume this new identity all that skillfully. The documents she presented to affirm her heirship were clear forgeries. More painfully, her white relatives came from Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Texas to tell a probate court judge that Taylor was a liar.

Linda Taylor's family was motivated less by a burning desire to tell the truth than an impulse to bury an uncomfortable secret. Taylor's uncle claimed improbably that her father was Portuguese. Taylor's mother also denied that she'd given birth to her own daughter, testifying that the child had been left on her doorstep as a 3-month-old infant.

That was a laughable story. It was also a pitiable one, confirmation that Taylor had never been wanted. The judge in that heirship case ruled, correctly, that Taylor had no claim on the gambling kingpin’s estate. At that point, one of her sons told me, Taylor decided that she was done with white people — that they’d done nothing but abandon and abuse her. Taylor left Lincoln Park and moved to a part of Chicago’s South Side that was essentially all black. That’s where she was living in the 1970s, when she was christened the welfare queen.

Linda Taylor was inarguably a villain. She had no regard for other people, and she preyed on most everyone she met, including her own children. It doesn’t excuse her crimes to acknowledge that she was also a victim, and she was victimized because of her race. It’s impossible to understand her life without understanding where she came from, a place and time where the line between black and white could not be smudged. When Taylor changed identities, she wasn’t deviously leveraging race to her advantage. She defied America’s strict racial categories to secure a life she couldn’t otherwise grasp, and to construct a private mythology that made more sense to her than the grim reality of what she’d seen and what she’d done.

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