

Editorial

A pact with the Devil

The so-called Contract with America targets, especially, the most vulnerable—the very young and the very old. Anyone who supports it, is guilty of the same kind of sin as the individual who decides to make a pact with the Devil.

Typical, is the case of an individual who wants more pleasure or power from life. Along comes a seeming person—in reality the Devil—who convinces this individual to accept a rotten deal: immediate gratification in return for selling one's soul. The denouement occurs as the gates of Hell are opening, and the individual attempts to avoid the fate he or she seems so richly to deserve. Tension arises from the need to answer the question, has repentance come too late?

In the case of the Gingrich-Gramm proposal to remove the safety net from children born to poor families and the elderly, we have been given a foretaste of Hell in the events which took place in Chicago, during this summer's extraordinary heat wave. The unnecessary and horrible deaths of the elderly which occurred, are genocide, which will become widespread should the proposed budget cuts be put into effect over President Clinton's veto.

The heat wave, which reached its peak in a four-day period during July 13-17, saw temperatures in Chicago of 106°—the effects of which were exacerbated by high humidity. It is estimated that in Cook County, Illinois, 589 people died as a direct consequence of the weather. During the period of July 13-21, a total of 1,177 deaths occurred in Chicago, an 85% increase over the same period in 1994, which saw 637 deaths.

In 83 cases, the body temperatures of the people who died were known to have exceeded 105°—cases of death from heat prostration. In other cases, where the bodies were found in apartments or houses where there was little ventilation, death from heat prostration could be inferred. The victims' rooms had in effect become ovens, with temperatures as high as 120°.

In many instances, these people, mostly elderly, had fans or air conditioners, but had not used them,

because they simply could not afford the added electricity costs. In some high-crime areas, landlords had nailed apartment windows shut. Many of these older citizens, who lived in poor areas with little police protection, were fearful of leaving their apartments to seek shelter in cool environments, such as libraries. Others were too weak to travel unassisted, especially because it was so hot.

The benefits of air conditioning were established in a study by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia after a 1980 heat wave. The study found that access to air conditioning was the single greatest life-saver. They found that those without air conditioning had a 50% greater risk of dying from the heat.

The Gingrich-Gramm crowd proposes to remove from next year's budget, the paltry sum of \$100 million, which has in the past been made available to low-income families to subsidize home-heating and electricity payments. Some of this money was tapped to provide cool shelters for people during the recent heat wave (\$6 million for Chicago).

Because low-income households spend on average three times more of the share of their income on electricity and home heating, this cut would be devastating. Roughly 5.3 million households, around 1.5 million of which consist of elderly persons, benefitted from this program. Even so, due to limited funds, only 20% of the low-income households eligible for assistance received it, compared to 1983, when 36% of the eligible households received assistance. Next year there may be no funds at all. Gramm and Gingrich wish to remove children from the welfare roles, even when they are born to married couples, if their parents are already on the welfare roles. They propose to strip down social services, including food and medical assistance for the poor and elderly.

If Gramm and Gingrich have their way, what we saw in Chicago this summer will become the norm. The Contract with America is indeed a pact with the Devil, and if it is implemented—make no mistake—it will turn our nation into Hell.