

spotlight on
POVERTY and
OPPORTUNITY

Toward a conservative agenda on opportunity: A conversation with Tamar Jacoby

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The last few years have seen new interest on the center-right in issues of poverty and economic opportunity. [This Way Up](#), a new collection of essays commissioned by Opportunity America and published by the American Enterprise Institute, highlights some of these proposals and the values that underlie them. Spotlight spoke with Tamar Jacoby, president of Opportunity America and editor of the collection, about these ideas and the extent to which they are influencing Republican politicians. The conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

What was the inspiration behind “This Way Up?”

I don't think there's anyone anywhere along the political spectrum who would deny that for too many people the American Dream no longer seems true or real. Politically, many people think progressives have a monopoly on ideas about how to fix poverty. But the truth is, there's a rich intellectual ferment on the center-right – new thinking focused on poverty, opportunity, and mobility. Conservatives use different rhetoric than liberals and often have different ideas about solutions. But there's a lot of thought being given to these issues. There's a new energy and a new excitement. And the goal of the book is to lift it up.

What has given rise to this new energy?

Well, for one thing, it existed before Donald Trump quote-unquote discovered the working class. It really began with the Great Recession. Suddenly, lots of people were losing their jobs and being thrown out of their homes, and you had to be living in a soundproof booth not to notice the suffering – or the need for new, better solutions. The 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty added to the momentum – and so frankly did things like the Occupy Movement. Thoughtful conservatives began to reconsider the issue of poverty and think about it in a more focused way, and their solutions were different than those on the left.

The book starts by outlining some of the key values and principles of the conservative approach to poverty and opportunity. What are those?

There are certain enduring tenets of the center-right approach. The first is that government is only part of the solution – businesses and the faith community must also play a role. Second, the centrality of work – work as a paycheck and the dignity of work. Third, the family – two-parent families are essential. These principles have always been at the core of conservative ideas about poverty. What's different today: center-right thinking is growing more sophisticated and more urgent.

Can you talk about a few of the policy ideas or proposals in the book?

Well, let's start with thinkers adding new, more sophisticated twists to old ideas. Larry Mead of NYU, for example, has an essay on what he calls welfare reform for men, a new version of the welfare reform, largely for women, implemented by center-right and center-left together in the 1990s. Another essay discusses the EITC – the Earned Income Tax Credit, which has had support from both President Obama and Paul Ryan – and looks at ideas for making it better.

Other essays break new ground. There is a great piece on income-driven college financing – repayment of student loans linked to income later in life. And I have an essay about leveling the playing field so that federal support for skills training is on a par with funding for higher education.

You talk about the different values that conservatives and liberals bring to the table when it comes to these issues. Do you see these differing principles as a significant barrier to bipartisanship around poverty and opportunity?

Well, at the moment, the parties can't even come together to name post offices. This is not the moment to be optimistic about bipartisanship – and I say that with deep despair and sadness.

But even in a better climate, I think there will be a divide – and the problem is “pay fors” as much as values. Obama and Ryan agreed on expanding the EITC, but there was no agreement about where to find the money.

At a more philosophical level, there's often an argument about the root cause of the problem. Is it norms and culture, as the right often thinks – or economics, as the left holds? But if people were willing to cooperate, and we could find the money, I think we could come together around some solutions that address both kinds of root causes.

A lot of the ideas for this book came together just after the 2016 election when Republicans were starting to think through their governing agenda. To what extent do you think the type of agenda you lay out here has been reflected in the work of Republican officeholders?

Well, let's be honest: the issues we're talking about haven't exactly been a priority this year. Health reform was the focus, then taxes, and the partisan climate hasn't helped. But in small ways, often beneath the radar, there have been signs of progress and potential. Republicans in the House are planning a push on welfare reform – giving people skills and getting them back into the workforce. And other Congressional Republicans have been moving forward with the PROSPER Act – that's their reauthorization of the Higher Education Act – which would also help with workforce training.

Democrats don't like either of these initiatives – and neither is likely to usher in dramatic changes. But the point is there are Republicans out there looking for solutions and trying to make what they see as incremental progress.

Tamar Jacoby is president of Opportunity America and editor of "This Way Up: New Thinking about Poverty and Economic Mobility."