

Trump's War on the Poor

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America hasn't always, or even usually, been governed by the best and the brightest; over the years, presidents have employed plenty of knaves and fools. But I don't think we've ever seen anything like the collection of petty grifters and miscreants surrounding Donald Trump. Price, Pruitt, Zinke, Carson and now Ronny Jackson: At this point, our default assumption should be that there's something seriously wrong with anyone this president wants on his team.

Still, we need to keep our eye on the ball. The perks many Trump officials demand — the gratuitous first-class travel, the double super-secret soundproof phone booths, and so on — are outrageous, and they tell you a lot about the kind of people they are. But what really matters are their policy decisions. Ben Carson's insistence on spending taxpayer funds on a \$31,000 dining set is ridiculous; his proposal to sharply raise housing costs for hundreds of thousands of needy American families, tripling rents for some of the poorest households, is vicious.

And this viciousness is part of a broader pattern. Last year, Trump and his allies in Congress devoted most of their efforts to coddling the rich; this was obviously true of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, but even the assault on Obamacare was largely about securing hundreds of billions in tax cuts for the wealthy. This year, however, the G.O.P.'s main priority seems to be making war on the poor.

That war is being fought on multiple fronts. The move to slash housing subsidies follows moves to sharply increase work requirements for those seeking food stamps. Meanwhile, the administration has been granting Republican-controlled states waivers allowing them to impose onerous new work requirements for recipients of Medicaid — requirements whose main effect would probably be not more work, but simply fewer people getting essential health care.

Even the administration's de facto financial deregulation — its systematic gutting of consumer financial protection — should be seen largely as an attack on the least well off, since poor families and less educated workers are the most likely victims of exploitative bankers.

The interesting question is not whether Trump and friends are trying to make the lives of the poor nastier, more brutal and shorter. They are. The question, instead, is why.

Is it about saving money? Conservatives do complain about the cost of safety net programs, but it's hard to take those complaints seriously coming from people who just voted to explode the budget deficit with huge tax cuts. Moreover, there's good evidence that some of the programs under attack actually do what tax cuts don't: eventually pay back a significant part of their upfront costs by promoting better economic performance.

For example, the creation of the food stamp program didn't just make the lives of recipients

a bit easier. It also had major positive impacts on the long-term health of children from poor families, which made them more productive as adults — more likely to pay taxes, less likely to need further public assistance.

The same goes for Medicaid, where new studies suggest that more than half of each dollar spent on health care for children eventually comes back as higher tax receipts from healthier adults.

What about the idea that anti-poverty programs create a “poverty trap,” reducing the incentive for people to work their way to a better life? That’s a very popular notion on the right. But the reality is that there are very few Americans getting food stamps or Medicaid who could and should be working but aren’t.

It’s true that some calculations indicate that means-tested programs — programs available only to those with sufficiently low incomes — can create disincentives for working and earning. But the evidence suggests that while safety net programs have some adverse effect on incentives, it’s a much smaller effect than many policymakers believe.

Furthermore, we could reduce those disincentives by making programs more generous, not less — providing more aid to the near-poor rather than less aid to the poor. Somehow, conservatives never seem to consider that option.

So what’s really behind the war on the poor? Pretty clearly, the pain this war will inflict is a feature, not a bug. Trump and his friends aren’t punishing the poor reluctantly, out of the belief that they must be cruel to be kind. They just want to be cruel.

Glenn Thrush of The New York Times reported, “Mr. Trump, aides said, refers to nearly every program that provides benefits to poor people as welfare, a term he regards as derogatory.” And I guess you can see where that comes from. After all, he’s a self-made man who can’t attribute any of his own success to, say, inherited wealth. Oh, wait.

Seriously, a lot of people both in this administration and in Congress simply feel no empathy for the poor. Some of that lack of empathy surely reflects racial animus. But while the war on the poor will disproportionately hurt minority groups, it will also hurt a lot of low-income whites — in fact, it will surely end up hurting a lot of people who voted for Trump. Will they notice?