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Conservatives Don't Know the Enemy in War on Poverty

By Gary Stein

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I remember watching video during the war in Bosnia and thinking that I couldn't tell the difference between a Serb and a Croat. How can you fight a war when you don't know the enemy?

Of course those who were fighting did know the difference. But it strikes me that the people criticizing the poor and poverty programs still don't really know who's the enemy in the 50-year-old War on Poverty. They claim that the war has been lost, but do they truly understand what battles have been and are being fought or the nature of the victims?

A day of watching Fox News (and often CNN) or just the distillation displayed during *The Daily Show* can make you conclude that the war is truly between the Takers and the Makers.

For the record, the Makers are winning. The income divide is greater now than at the turn of the 20th century, with its monopolies and millionaire plutocrats.

What they fail to understand is that the [poverty level is at 15 percent today](#) not because of ineffective poverty programs but because many who were once middle class have become poor.

There are many who feel that we are spending too much to accomplish too little. U.S. Congressman Paul Ryan has [called those programs](#) a "hammock that lulls able-bodied people to lives of dependency and complacency, that drains them of their will and their incentive to make the most of their lives."

The bottom line is, if you feel that those using the safety net programs are there by choice, you do not know the enemy of the War on Poverty.

The life of an individual or family using those programs such as SNAP or unemployment is not pretty.

"Unemployment makes you more likely to have to borrow money from a friend, withdraw money from your retirement savings, and have trouble paying your medical bills, rent, and mortgage. It makes you more likely to have a stroke or heart attack, lose self-respect, have difficulty sleeping, and seek professional help for anxiety and depression. It makes you more likely to kill yourself, kill others, and drink yourself to death, " according to [Anthony W. Orlando](#), a lecturer in the College of Business and Economics at California State University in Los Angeles.

He explains one reason why the unemployed are staying there longer. "If you've been unemployed for more than a few months, most employers won't even look at your résumé. It doesn't matter how qualified you are. It's like you don't exist anymore," Orlando said.

So where do legislators like Ryan get their facts?

According to [Robert Reich](#), the Cato institute released a report that claims, "the federal government spends \$668 billion a year on welfare, and the states an additional \$300 billion or so -- for a total annual welfare expenditure of about \$1 trillion."

But Reich contends that the total is misleading.

"It's a cooked-up figure that includes Medicaid, Title I education grants, job training, even low-income taxpayer clinics, that aren't at all direct payments. And it includes a lot of double-counting, since the states get much of their funding from the federal government," Reich said.

"At most, America's poor receive \$212 billion a year. And almost half of this is available only to people who are working -- the refundable part of the Earned Income Tax Credit (\$55 billion), the Child Tax Credit, and Supplemental Security Income (\$43.7 billion)," Reich said. "The only direct help available to the non-working poor and their families are food stamps (\$75 billion), housing vouchers (\$18 billion), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (\$21 billion), for a total of \$114 billion."

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio had his own solution to poverty. [He stated](#):

"Our current president and his liberal allies propose that we address this by spending more on these failed programs and increasing the minimum wage to \$10.10. Really? That is their solution to what President Obama has identified as the defining issue of our time? Raising the minimum wage may poll well, but having a job that pays \$10 an hour is not the American Dream."

Apparently, Rubio wants to raise the minimum wage to twice that amount so those jobs are "a more enticing alternative to collecting unemployment insurance."

The problem is that he wants to do this with a federal subsidy paid to Walmart and McDonald's to offset the cost of the higher wages. That, in essence, allows those corporations to continue keeping record profits while forcing employees to use governmental benefit programs. It is another form of corporate welfare. It means that we are paying taxes to benefit those companies,

rather than embracing the fiscally conservative paradigm of expecting the private sector to do their part to make our capitalistic system work. I would vote no on that one.

Until our legislators truly define and understand the stakeholders in this war, it cannot be won.