

Deseret News

Lee urges conservatives to fight poverty, echoes Brigham Young's appeal to 'bring them in'

By [Jackie Hicken](#)

Nov. 15 2013

Utah Sen. Mike Lee echoed Brigham Young in a speech Wednesday at the Heritage Foundation Anti-Poverty Forum as he urged listeners to help their fellow Americans out of poverty by embarking on a mission to "bring them in."

In 1856, after receiving word that hundreds of members of the Willie and Martin handcart companies were suffering and dying on the plains, Young stood before members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and urged them to mount an immediate rescue mission.

"Your faith ... and profession of religion, will never save one soul of you ... unless you carry out just such principles as I am now teaching," Lee quoted Brigham Young as saying. "Go and bring in those people now on the plains."

"Today, millions more of our neighbors are still out on the plains," Lee said. "They are not some government's brothers and sisters — they are ours. And the time has come to do something about it. As conservatives, as Americans and as human beings, we have it in our power — individually, together and where necessary, through government ... to bring them in."

Lee urged conservatives to lead a "new, bold and heroic offensive in the war on poverty" by building an agenda that ensures government dollars benefit the underprivileged, expands access to education, gets civil society involved, celebrates stable marriages and reforms the U.S. criminal justice, prison, tax, regulatory, energy and transportation systems.

He cited Utah's combination of "a smart, efficient government, a growing prosperous economy, an active and faithful civil society" and the private LDS welfare system as a model to follow and as reasons Salt Lake [leads in upward mobility](#).

"Free enterprise and civil society operate in the natural human space — between the isolated individual and the impersonal state — where we live and love and flourish," Lee said. "In America, government did not invade or replace that space. Government protected and expanded it. That is how we proved to the world that freedom doesn't mean 'you're on your own.' Freedom means 'we're all in this together.' The conservative vision for America is not an Ayn Rand novel.

It's a Norman Rockwell painting or a Frank Capra movie: a nation 'of plain, ordinary kindness and a little looking out for the other fellow, too.'"

Lee's speech at the anti-poverty forum follows a [previous speech](#) at the American Enterprise Institute in which he laid out the goals of his Family Fairness and Opportunity Tax Reform Act, which he said reforms the tax code to "rescue the nation — and ourselves — from (the) crisis of unequal opportunity."

[According to new data](#) from the Supplemental Poverty Measure, America's current poverty rate stands at 16 percent. Research released by the Republicans on the Senate Budget Committee in October shows that [the U.S. has spent \\$3.7 trillion](#) on 80 different means-tested poverty and welfare programs in the last five years.

"Despite nearly \$15 trillion in total welfare spending since Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty in 1964, the poverty rate is perilously close to where we began more than 40 years ago," Michael Tanner wrote in a [2012 Cato Institute report on the American welfare state](#). "It is time to re-evaluate our approach to fighting poverty."

Efforts within the Republican Party to turn attention to poverty picked up steam after the election, with conservative thinkers urging Republicans to explore new ways to woo voters by offering a hand up rather than a handout.

The Republican ["Growth and Opportunity Project"](#) report — the party's post-election autopsy — concluded that if the GOP is to grow, its "policies and actions must take into account that the middle class has struggled mightily and that far too many of our citizens live in poverty."

"To people who are flat on their back, unemployed or disabled and in need of help, they do not care if the help comes from the private sector or the government — they just want help," the Republican paper concluded.

"The answer is to make improving the lives of vulnerable people the primary focus of authentically conservative policies," Arthur Brooks, the president of the American Enterprise Institute, urged in a [Wall Street Journal](#) article. "For example, the core problem with out-of-control entitlements is not that they are costly — it is that the impending insolvency of Social Security and Medicare imperils the social safety net for the neediest citizens. Education innovation and school choice are not needed to fight rapacious unions and bureaucrats — too often the most prominent focus of conservative education concerns — but because poor children and their parents deserve better schools."

"Our party excels at representing the aspirations of our nation's risk-takers. We celebrate that part of the American Dream that involves finding your passion and making a living from it," 2012 Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan said in [a Dec. 2012 speech](#). "But there is another part of the American creed: When our neighbors are struggling, we look out for one another. We do that best through our families and communities — and our party must stand for making them stronger."

Critics of the Republican Party have long argued that the GOP has an inherent hostility to the poor, as evidenced by Mitt Romney's comments about the ["47 percent"](#) and [gifts to voting blocs](#) during and after the 2012 election, as well as party members' approaches to things like food stamp funding, Social Security reform proposals and taxes.

In an Oct. 31 op-ed in [The New York Times](#), Paul Krugman argued that the refusal to expand Medicaid in Republican-led states and proposals to cut food stamp funding show Republicans are "passionate about making sure the poor and unlucky get as little help as possible."

"There is a school of thought on the right that is rooted in the cruel atheism and pseudo-libertarianism of Ayn Rand, and one champion of that is Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., the chairman of the House Budget Committee," Brent Budowsky wrote at [The Hill](#) on Oct. 31. "They wage war against the poor and despise any attempt to help them. They embody the curse of selfishness and greed (that) plagues the Republican Party today and is a major source of the unpopularity of the tea party and the GOP today."

David Harsanyi, writing at Human Events after the release of the 2012 Republican election postmortem, warned that while Republicans should be compassionate, they should not try to challenge the Democratic Party in promising that government is the solution and should do more.

"If Republicans start holding up government as the principal source of empathy, hope and charity, American can expect an even bigger arms race in spending and dependency — the kind that, in the end, burdens the young and poor and everyone else," he said.