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The Real State of the Union 2015

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The real state of the union 2015

January 19, 2015

In advance of the president's speech, we invited writers to offer straight assessments of the state of the nation in the form of brief reports, by subject,

1. Economy

Reporters apparently feel obligated to describe the economy as either good or bad. After years of calling it bad, some better-than-expected data from the last few months have caused them to switch to the good mode. In fact, there has been so much euphoria about the economy in recent months that the Republicans now want to [take credit](#) for it.

This is more than a bit over the top. The economy is doing better than it had been but is still far from the sort of economy that people should be celebrating.

To refresh memories, the economy essentially fell off a cliff in the second half of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 because of the financial crisis that followed the collapse of the housing bubble. The economy lost more than 8 million jobs from the 2007 employment peak until the trough in the fall of 2009. GDP fell by almost 4.5 percent.

Since the worst of the recession in 2009, the economy has been slowly growing and making up lost ground. Because of the slow pace of growth and the upward redistribution of income over this period, most people are still considerably worse off than before the recession began.

This can be seen most clearly with employment. If the [same share of the population were employed](#) today as before the downturn, the U.S. would have almost 5 million more jobs. The number of people employed part-time who would like full-time employment is still more than 2 million above prerecession levels, even though that number has fallen sharply over the last four years.

Furthermore, wages have been virtually flat throughout the recovery. After adjusting for inflation, the [average hourly wage for all workers](#) is unchanged over the last six years.

None of this should surprise. The basic story is a simple one: It is difficult to recover from a recession caused by the collapse of an asset bubble. The economy has had bad recessions before. In 1974 and '75 the unemployment rate peaked at 9 percent. In 1981 and '82 it peaked at 10.8 percent. In both cases the economy bounced back quickly from the downturn. In 1980 the economy was almost 19 percent larger than it was in 1973. In 1988 the economy was more than 28 percent larger than it was in 1981. By contrast, in 2014 the economy was just 8.1 percent larger than in 2007.

Furthermore, because of the prolonged weakness of the labor market, we have seen an unprecedented shift of income from wages to profits. As a result of the shift from wages to profits, coupled with slow growth, aggregate wages are 20 percent lower today than what had been projected for 2015 by the Congressional Budget Office in 2007, before the recession. It is difficult to see this story as one that merits much celebration.

The rate of economic and job growth picked up in 2014, but even at the pace we saw in 2014, it would take two full years to get back to full employment. This matters not only for the people who are unable to get jobs but also for those who already have jobs. They are not going to be able to secure wage increases until the labor market is considerably tighter than it is. As a result, the gains from growth are likely to continue to go largely to profits and high-end wage earners.

While the economy appears to be poised for modest progress, there is one clear threat on the horizon. There is much pressure on the Federal Reserve Board to raise interest rates, starting this year. While a Fed rate hike would not throw the economy into a recession, it would slow growth. This policy is hard to justify; there is no evidence of inflationary pressure anywhere, and there still is a huge amount of slack in the labor market.

If the Fed slows growth enough, the labor markets may never get tight enough to allow workers to get their share of the gains of growth. If that proves to be the case, then the story at the time of the State of the Union in 2016 will not be very different from the story today.

Dean Baker is a co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research and the author, most recently, of “[The End of Loser Liberalism: Making Markets Progressive.](#)”

2. Energy

The sharp drop in gasoline prices — down about \$1.20 a gallon from a year ago and likely to stay down through 2016 — is terrific news for American consumers, especially those whose wages have not kept up with inflation in this century.

In his 2008 presidential campaign Barack Obama promised to “cut U.S. oil consumption of foreign oil by 2.5 million barrels of oil per day ... and save American consumers more than \$50 billion at the gas pump.”

Mission accomplished — and more. Oil imports are down by more than he promised and falling.

Cheaper gasoline means saving about \$150 billion at the pump this year, the equivalent of an across-the-board 10 percent cut in federal income taxes. The benefits, though, are weighted in favor of the bottom 80 percent of Americans, who spend a larger share of their incomes on gas.

Cheaper gasoline will save the average American family [about \\$750](#) this year, the federal Energy Information Administration estimated on Jan. 13. That is enough to offset a chunk of the [\\$1,000 decline in real income per person](#) from 2000 to 2012.

The amount of domestic oil and natural gas recoverable with existing technology is at [record highs](#). The Energy Information Administration expects [gasoline prices](#) to be about \$2.50 a gallon through the end of next year.

What's more, nearly all the increased domestic production has come from the cleanest, highest quality crude oils, which do the least damage to the environment.

Cheap gasoline is just the most visible aspect of the energy issues facing America. The dramatic fall in spot oil prices from \$110 a barrel last summer to \$46 last week has other consequences. Among them:

One in eight oil drilling rigs has shut down in the last two months, reducing working rigs to their lowest level in more than four years.

Cheap gasoline may prompt purchases of less-fuel-efficient vehicles, putting upward pressure on prices. Last year sales of SUV-like vehicles grew 11.8 percent and pickup trucks 10 percent, compared with just 1.8 percent for cars.

Lower oil prices make it harder to justify new investments in solar, wind and other energy sources that do not depend on burning fossil fuels, disrupting long-term manufacturing and investment strategies.

Demand will remain weak for electric cars such as the Chevy Volt, Tesla and Nissan Leaf, which are mostly charged at night when electricity demand is lowest.

In 2008 Obama said, "Our nation is confronted by two major energy challenges: our dependence on foreign oil and global climate change — both of which stem from our current dependence on fossil fuels for energy."

The climate change part will continue to be a major struggle for the administration. The American Petroleum Institute is urging the president to

approve the [Keystone XL pipeline](#) to move Canadian tar sands oil, an especially dirty fuel, to American refineries. How he will respond remains to be seen.

David Cay Johnston, an investigative reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize while at The New York Times, teaches business, tax and property law of the ancient world at the Syracuse University College of Law. He is the best-selling author of “Perfectly Legal,” “Free Lunch” and “The Fine Print” and editor of the new anthology “Divided: The Perils of Our Growing Inequality.”

3. Environment

With the clear scientific consensus that global emissions must be reduced by 80 percent or more by 2050, public attention is turning to two themes: What is the permissible budget of fossil fuel use? And what are our viable scientific, technological, economic and political options to power the economy cleanly before midcentury?

On the first question, a series of increasingly clear assessments have appeared that document the oversupply we have of carbon-based fuels. The environmental bottom line is that to meet our climate targets, cumulative carbon dioxide emissions must be less than 870 to 1,240 gigatons from 2011 to 2050 if we hope to limit global warming to 2°C above the average global temperature of preindustrial times. But the carbon contained in global resources of fossil fuels is estimated to be equivalent to about 11,000 gigatons of CO₂, which means that to limit global warming, large proportions of reserves must remain unexploited.

There have been recent calls from people and organizations concerned with global warming — including [The New York Times](#), the [Center for Climate and Energy Solutions](#) (formerly the Pew Center on Global Climate Change) and [a number of leading scientists, engineers and politicians](#) — to use nuclear electricity generation as part of the solution. They speak to the potential of nuclear to deliver large amounts of low-cost energy. New advanced reactors, small-modular reactors and perhaps even fusion are candidates to provide this

energy, and there are knowledgeable and ardent supporters of each of these technologies and pathways.

Of course, there are very serious concerns with the nuclear power industry as it has existed and as it might evolve. Alan Robock, a climatologist at Rutgers University, [summarized](#) these concerns in an exceptionally clear editorial piece for The Huffington Post last year. He questioned the ability of the nuclear power industry to respond appropriately to the issues of proliferation risk, the potential for catastrophic accidents, vulnerability to attacks, unsafe operations, economic viability, waste disposal, the dangers of uranium mining and carbon dioxide emissions relative to renewables. Battles between proponents and detractors are sure to continue, but economic viability alone — in other words, the cost and opportunity cost of investments in nuclear power as it exists — demonstrates the scale of the challenge.

Consider that of the 437 nuclear plants operating worldwide today, most will need to be replaced in the next three decades in order for nuclear power to maintain its generation capacity, let alone to grow as a major technology path to address climate change.

In our [ongoing work](#) on the energy economies of the U.S., my students and I find that there are diverse pathways that can achieve the needed 80 percent emission reduction by midcentury. Some are more solar dominated, some more wind driven, some heavily reliant on biological carbon capture, among other options. A carbon price of \$30 to \$40 per ton of carbon dioxide is critical to drive each of these cases, and nuclear is no exception.

Given the challenges Robock poses, nuclear fission faces a long and serious list of issues that the industry must address if it is to play a major role in power generation. Most energy planners would conclude that — at least so far — nuclear power has not been able to adequately address them.

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as the World Bank's chief technical specialist for renewable energy, and today he serves the U.S. Department of State as a fellow of the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas. He contributes to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

4. Foreign policy

There's no such thing as an Obama Doctrine. No overarching principle animates the president's erratic interventions and accumulating attempts at groundbreaking diplomacy. His foreign policy is based, rather, on a reactive pragmatism of asking what is reasonably achievable and by what means. But this tendency can leave allies in the lurch and has left people across Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East adrift in a sea of violence.

Consider the divergent paths Barack Obama has taken in the Ukrainian war and the Syrian conflict. To Russian assertions of power in restive eastern Ukraine, the U.S. reacted only with sanctions, as opposed to the military aid Republican hawks clamored for.

The same tack essentially dominated policy toward Syria, where hundreds of thousands of people have died, until the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its takeover of swaths of Syria and Iraq. Obama finally called for airstrikes to beat back the marauding jihadis, mostly on the Iraqi side of the border — a somewhat limited response in scope but not perhaps in duration, with American military commanders warning the war could last years.

So Obama effectively nullified his accomplishment in ending U.S. military involvement in Iraq because of changed circumstances; better to adapt to developments, the president believes, than to stay the course. That will be little comfort, however, to all the dead Syrians whose murderer, President Bashar al-Assad, we now effectively defend from a psychopathic foe. The failure to enter such conflicts on behalf of besieged civilians was underscored last week by the resignation of Stephen Rapp, Obama's top diplomat for pursuing war crimes,

after he accomplished little because of the absence of the administration's backing.

And yet Obama has kept one of his most important early foreign policy promises: to pursue vigorous diplomacy with friend and foe alike.

His diplomacy has yielded tentative results. He thawed relations with Cuba, possibly leading to détente. Negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program continue apace, with another of its twice-postponed deadlines looming next summer. And maybe most significant in terms of global challenges, the U.S. announced in November a surprise pact with China to limit emissions that cause climate change — and not a moment too soon, if not a few too late, with 2014 announced last week as the planet's hottest year on record.

Still, Obama's gains over the next two years will be precarious and are unlikely to see stable completion. Talks with Iran could collapse, and the agreement with China may not be enough to spark a global climate change compact. Think of the way U.S.-brokered Israeli-Palestinian talks collapsed last spring — after sucking up so much oxygen in Washington — only to be followed by a second brutal Israeli war in Gaza in two years. Or that the war against ISIL will, by all accounts, outlast Obama's second term.

Obama's foreign policy legacy, such that it is, will be subject to his successors' whims and policies. His most lasting mark in world affairs may be expanding the covert, global war against Al-Qaeda and its loosely defined affiliates. But we're not likely to hear much about drones on Tuesday; there's just too much going on in the world.

Ali Gharib is an independent journalist based in Brooklyn, New York. His work has appeared in The Nation, The Daily Beast, ForeignPolicy.com, The Columbia Journalism Review and Inter Press Service.

Women are now the backbone of the American economy, and what benefits them benefits everyone who depends on them. Unfortunately, women in the U.S. face multiple threats to their economic security.

The World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap Report for 2014](#), which measures gender equality in key areas, including economic participation, shows that the U.S. [ranks 20th out of 142 countries assessed](#). That's up from 23rd place in 2013, but we still trail the likes of Sweden, Germany, France, Ireland, Nicaragua, Canada and Iceland. And the U.S. ranks 65th in terms of "wage equality for similar work," even though American women are just as educated as men. Perhaps President Barack Obama could start work on this problem by addressing [pay disparities at the White House](#), where the average male currently earns about \$88,600 to the average female employee's \$78,400. Certainly he should make the wage gap a priority and call out Republicans who have consistently blocked efforts to address it.

The number of working mothers with infants [doubled](#) from 1976 to 2002, but the U.S. still lacks paid sick leave. [Research shows](#) that women who get paid leave after having a child are more likely to return to the workforce and to take home bigger paychecks than women who don't take leave. The president's recent memorandum directing agencies to advance federal workers six weeks of paid sick leave to care for a new child or sick family members is a good first step, but he must fulfill his promise to push lawmakers to pass the Healthy Families Act, which would provide all workers in businesses with 15 or more employees up to seven days of paid sick leave annually.

Families depend on women's paychecks more than ever before, yet since 2008, poverty rates for women, especially among single women with families, have risen. Women make up almost two-thirds of minimum wage workers, which is why raising the wage at the federal level and in the states to boost their economic security and help close the wage gap should be a priority. The president should also commit to expanding Social Security, particularly as Republicans attack the program. Women often leave the workforce after having

children, if only for a short time, and they still shoulder more of the burden of child care, which leaves them with lower benefits than men despite living longer and needing them more. Another important fight on the poverty front is women's reproductive rights. As the 42nd anniversary of Roe v. Wade on Jan. 22 approaches, we need a renewed commitment to protecting the ability of women to plan childbearing, which helps keep families economically secure.

Finally, we know that working women have a much better chance of securing decent salaries and benefits when they are represented by labor unions. Female workers in unions enjoy [clear advantages](#) in pay and benefits compared with their nonunionized peers; they earn 13 percent more on average. Attacks on unions are a direct threat to the economic security of women and their families, and we need to reform labor law so that workers can form unions and collectively bargain.

Lynn Stuart Parramore is a senior research analyst at the Institute for New Economic Thinking and a contributing editor at AlterNet.

6. Health

Health is more than the absence of disease. Nutrition and affordable care are crucial to the health of our nation. In 2014 judicial and regulatory changes on both fronts weakened public protection. With the anti-regulatory Republican majority in Congress, further deterioration looks likely in 2015.

Nutrition is at the heart of the debate on the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Health and Human Services' five-year [revision](#) of the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). Meat and dairy industries have [heavily influenced](#) past guidelines, with those industries [decrying](#) any warnings about overconsumption of animal products. Now the North American Meat Institute and congressional Republicans are trying to block advisory committee efforts to include information on the environmental effects of farming practices, especially in beef production.

Congress is expected to continue the pushback against school lunch nutrition rules that require more fruits, vegetables and whole grains and limit sugar, salt and fat. Food and Drug Administration [rules that require](#) calorie and nutrition labeling will be another target in 2015.

Food safety suffered further cuts in [inspection and enforcement](#) last year. For instance, the USDA shifted inspection responsibility to poultry plant employees from independent USDA inspectors. Another rule allowed poultry plants to keep inspection results secret from consumers.

Trade agreements may also weaken health and food safety protections in 2015. The European Union prohibits feeding growth-promoting hormones to beef cattle, bans use of chlorine in processing chicken and requires labeling of food containing GMO (genetically modified) content. These protections affect U.S. food supplies, leading some U.S. producers to modify their practices in order to maintain a share of the export market. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership now being negotiated between the U.S. and E.U. could weaken these protections.

Meanwhile, Congress began the new session with yet another move to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the 54th such vote since the law was passed in March 2012. None of these votes succeeded, but opponents continue to try, both in Congress and in the courts. A pending court challenge attempts to end subsidies for insurance coverage for millions of Americans who signed up through state exchange programs.

Meanwhile, millions have benefited from the ACA, including young people now able to stay on their parents' policies until age 26. Millions of Americans were newly insured through the ACA and Medicaid last year. (All surveys show a substantial decline in the number of people who are uninsured, with [one recent survey](#) showing a drop of 8 million, or more than 25 percent.) Many families now have access to free vaccinations, mammograms and other preventive care. Although the ACA expanded Medicaid eligibility, many Republican-led states

refused to take advantage of the expansion, leaving millions of low-income residents without affordable health care.

Insurance companies undermine health care coverage in insidious ways. Their cost-shifting tactics include changing policy provisions on renewal dates, increasing deductibles and imposing higher out-of-pocket co-payments for doctor visits, emergency room care and prescription drugs.

Until a single-payer health care system is adopted, political opponents and insurance companies will continue to chop and nibble away at every program. Little progress will happen in 2015 on nutrition and health care when big agribusiness coalitions and the health insurance industry have the ear of the Republican Congress.

Mary Turck is an adjunct faculty member at Macalester College and a former editor of The Twin Cities Daily Planet.

7. Justice

“Equal justice under law” reads the proclamation above the entrance to the U.S. Supreme Court. These four words are supposed to be the cornerstone of our judicial system. But in reality, some people are more equal than others.

For powerful corporations and wealthy individuals, the system works just fine. In 2014 the court eroded corporate accountability, expanded corporate power and enhanced the influence of big money in politics. But for poor, marginalized and disempowered Americans, justice and the rule of law remain elusive.

In *Daimler AG v. Bauman*, the [court limited U.S. jurisdiction](#) over foreign corporate defendants, making it more difficult for victims of human rights abuses to seek redress. Later an appeals court decision found that illegal payments made to a repressive Colombian paramilitary group by Chiquita executives in Ohio did not “touch and concern” the U.S. In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, the court ruled that closely held companies are not required to provide insurance coverage

for contraceptives over owners' religious objections. And the *McCutcheon v. FEC* ruling struck down aggregate limits for individual contributions to federal candidates and political parties, bolstering its *Citizens United* decision, which gutted campaign finance reform. As campaigns for 2016 presidential election pickup steam, the unprecedented influence of money in politics continues to elevate the interests of the powerful and undermine the integrity of our democracy.

But the majority of Americans face vastly different prospects for justice. The deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of police and the failure to secure indictments incited an outpouring of outrage. While police brutality is at the extreme end of the continuum, the criminal process is permeated by deeply embedded biases that influence the disproportionate suspicion, arrest, conviction and punishment of people of color. As a result, 2.3 million Americans languish in jails designed for harsh punishment, not rehabilitation and a chance to rebuild their lives. Meanwhile, white-collar criminals go unpunished. The travesty of mass incarceration reinforces calls for a real reckoning with the sordid racial past that continues to bleed into the present. The gap of justice in civil matters is equally stark: Only 20 percent of low-income people are able to obtain legal representation for cases that affect their families, property and livelihoods.

Those caught up in the tangled web of the "war on terrorism" fared poorly as well, as Washington's disregard for the rule of law continued to tarnish its international reputation and engender bitter resentment. Although President Barack Obama's administration finally started to move detainees out of the Guantánamo Bay prison in Cuba, 122 inmates remain. On Jan. 13, [four Republican senators](#) introduced legislation that would make it nearly impossible for the president to fulfill his promise to close the facility. Last month's release of the Senate Intelligence Committee torture report summary generated shock and revulsion, fueling calls for real accountability for torture and extraordinary rendition, although Obama has made clear his administration will not pursue prosecutions for the program's architects. And despite international condemnation, the U.S. continues to use drones for extrajudicial assassinations

abroad, even as it fights allowing transparency over the program's goals and human costs.

While the vaunted ideal of equal justice under law may be etched in stone on the facade of the nation's highest court, it is hardly a reality for all.

Lauren Carasik is a clinical professor of law and the director of the international human rights clinic at the Western New England University School of Law.

8. Privacy

The fight for privacy in the post–Edward Snowden era took one step forward and several steps back in 2014. Surveillance reformers had a hopeful eye on the USA Freedom Act, a modest proposal to effectively end the National Security Agency's phone records dragnet, which independent panels declared both unconstitutional and ineffective. But even with the support of the intelligence community, the bill failed in a procedural vote amid fearmongering over new supposed threats such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

It's not all gloom and doom, though. While Congress has failed to make meaningful progress on mass surveillance reform, Snowden's revelations have prompted a meteoric rise in the use of encryption. More and more websites are switching to encrypted SSL connections to deter eavesdroppers, while major tech companies are competing to offer customers adequate privacy. WhatsApp, a messaging service bought by Facebook last year, recently turned on end-to-end encrypted chats for Android devices; the majority of its more than 500 million users can now send messages that are unreadable by any third party — including WhatsApp itself. Apple and Google have made strong advances in user security, deploying improved encryption schemes for their mobile operating systems that block criminals and cops alike from accessing a device's stored data without the user's passcode.

With strong encryption becoming ubiquitous, police and governments are pushing back by demanding that companies build back doors into their products.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was first to complain publicly about Apple and Google's new encryption schemes, attempting to scare the public into thinking encryption would cripple its ability to catch criminals. After the attacks in Paris, British Prime Minister David Cameron went so far as to propose a ban on any secure communication apps that the government can't access.

But to do so would be to endanger not just privacy but also companies' ability to build truly secure products. [As experts point out](#), there is no such thing as a golden key for encryption that only the government can use: If governments can force companies to introduce back doors into software and hardware, those flaws can be exploited by hackers and hostile nation-states. And if governments ban strong encryption, the only people whose communications are protected will be criminals.

The debate, then, is between two conflicting models of cybersecurity: One secures devices and data, and the other allows the government to monitor everything. Obama's newly announced cybersecurity proposals make clear which is more popular in Washington; they contain no practical measures that would have prevented the recent hacks of Sony Pictures, Target and Home Depot, such as enforcing basic security standards for companies that hold Americans' data. What they do include is an information-sharing scheme allowing corporations to give user data to the government under the pretext of predicting threats.

We already know that properly implemented encryption works. Even the U.S. government, in a [classified document recently released](#) from Snowden's archive, says it's the "best defense" for those trying to protect their data. State surveillance, meanwhile, can't be verified for its effectiveness; it asks us to simply trust the government's vigilance.

We are called on to make a choice: security for everyone or privacy for no one.

Joshua Kopstein is a cyberculture journalist and researcher from New York City. His work focuses on Internet law and disorder, surveillance and government secrecy.

9. Social services

Presidential hopefuls and other Republican politicians have been talking a lot about poverty lately, but what does the new Congress have in store for America's 46 million poor people? President Barack Obama has proposed initiatives aimed at greater opportunities for struggling families and individuals — free community college, paid sick and family leave and a minimum wage increase. He will face strong opposition from the Republican-led Congress, where most existing social programs are targeted for cuts.

Already, a measure passed in the House threatens 20 percent cuts in Social Security disability payments by 2016; it would affect 11 million people, more than a quarter of them veterans. That is only the beginning. Next year nondefense discretionary spending is [projected to fall to its lowest level](#) as a share of GDP since 1962 and to continue to fall thereafter. Social Security is back in the crosshairs, with the new House Budget Committee chair, Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., vowing to raise the age of retirement and allow private investments. Meanwhile, up to 1.5 million people could lose access to “Obamacare” in recent House legislation that [redefines full-time employment](#) as 40 hours a week rather than 30. The Supreme Court decision in *King v. Burwell* this spring could do huge damage to the Affordable Care Act by disallowing subsidies in states that did not create their own exchanges.

Also slated for deep spending cuts by the House is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps; the 2015 budget proposal calls for \$10 billion reductions yearly for the next decade. The temporary budget agreement — the CRomnibus — cuts \$93 billion from programs that provide food for mothers and children. Further, expiration of eligibility rules in 2016 means that 1 million unemployed childless adults will lose their SNAP benefits.

All 10 new Republican senators have pledged to end the program. Funding for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) has shrunk over time and continues to fall with inflation. Block grants to states have produced variable benefits, but the overall percentage of recipients among those eligible has dropped from more than half in 1998 to about 15 percent; Texas is at [7 percent](#). Although the CRomnibus budget agreement retained funding for TANF, many states have cut their shares, and the value of benefits continues to erode.

Housing vouchers and public housing funding have suffered reductions too. Sequestration cut 70,000 low-income rental vouchers, a level retained in the current budget, with further cuts to program administration. Public housing authorities were cut by \$165 million, and affordable housing construction is funded by 30 percent less than it was last year.

Although Obama will likely veto new bills that contain large cuts to safety net programs and there will be stiff Democratic opposition to threats against Social Security, Medicare and other popular programs, there is a clear partisan split in opinion about funds to alleviate poverty and provide social services. The strong congressional advantage of Republicans — who believe in personal responsibility, the uplifting effects of coping with adversity, liberation from government assistance and private charity over public entitlement — severely threatens what remains of the 50-year-old war on poverty.

Susan Greenbaum is a professor emerita of anthropology at the University of South Florida. She is the author of a forthcoming book about the Moynihan report, "[Blaming the Poor](#)," from Rutgers University Press. It will be published in 2015, the year of its 50th anniversary.

The views expressed here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.