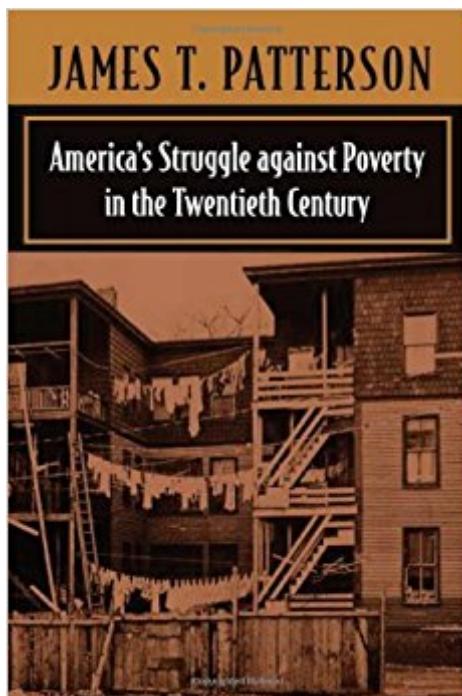


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America's Struggle Against Poverty In The Twentieth Century



Synopsis

This new edition of Patterson's widely used book carries the story of battles over poverty and social welfare through what the author calls the "amazing 1990s," those years of extraordinary performance of the economy. He explores a range of issues arising from the economic phenomenon--increasing inequality and demands for use of an improved poverty definition. He focuses the story on the impact of the highly controversial welfare reform of 1996, passed by a Republican Congress and signed by a Democratic President Clinton, despite the laments of anguished liberals.

Book Information

Paperback: 360 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; 4th edition (September 1, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674004345

ISBN-13: 978-0674004344

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #70,496 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #51 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > Public Affairs #70 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Public Affairs & Administration #85 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Policy

Customer Reviews

[Patterson's] perspective on poverty continues to be an influential one in the debate about which policies help and which hurt the poor ... Readers will be reminded of many things they had forgotten, will learn some things they never knew, and will be provoked to new questions. (Herbert Stein Fortune)A splendid introduction to and review of the attitudes in the United States toward the poor and of efforts to ameliorate their condition...Patterson treats his subject with verve, energy, and considerable style...No one with any interest in the subject can afford to ignore it. (Daniel J. Leab Political Science Quarterly)

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performance of the economy. He explores a range of issues arising from the economic phenomenon -- increasing inequality and demands for use of an improved poverty definition. He focuses the story on the impact of the highly controversial welfare reform of 1996, passed by a Republican Congress and signed by a Democratic President Clinton, despite the laments of anguished liberals.

This book is extremely readable. It lays out the story of poverty in America; the programs, policies and legislation that were created to address it; and the social, political and cultural issues surrounding it all. The guy writes very, very well, and it is enjoyable. I did buy it for school at the University of Chicago, but anyone with an interest in this subject would enjoy it.

I read this book for my Programs & Policy class. Patterson is fairly evenhanded throughout. A brief, yet informative overview.

Throughout the 20th century, by practically every standard of measurement, the United States was the wealthiest nation in the world. Nevertheless, there always have been poor. This complex study by James Patterson, Professor of History at Brown University, seeks to explain the coexistence of wealth and poverty people in American society during the last century. In the process, Patterson makes a number of incisive observations about the nature of poverty. In the preface to the current edition, written in 1994, Patterson provocatively asserts his "continuing belief that poverty in the United States is not only a major concern - [is] perhaps the biggest the nation faces." This book is not easy reading, but it is essential for anyone seeking to understand an important issue in American politics at the beginning of the 21st century. Patterson's explication of competing theoretical approaches to the problem of poverty is excellent. In speaking about the 1940s and 1950s, Patterson identifies three "overlapping insights," although it is clear that these schools of thought evolved and recurred over the course of the century. The cultural anthropological perspective asserted that "class and poverty were cultural instead of economic" and that the behavior of poor people "is usually a perfectly realistic, adaptive, and - in slum life - socially acceptable response to reality." The liberal view originally expected the "economic revival of 1940-42 [to] solve the problem of destitution, [but] they insisted that welfare must remain an important element in public policy." The structuralists, according to Patterson, also "assumed the long-term need for extensive need for extensive public welfare" but also sought "major initiatives to counter low wages and underemployment." In the middle of the book, Patterson makes the astute,

invaluable point that "policy formation rarely follows from a single intellectual perspective," and the implication is that legislated poverty programs often have drawn from two or more of these perspectives. Patterson writes: The economic growth between 1900 and 1929 prompted great optimism among social scientists." According to Patterson: "Some reformers, reflecting the optimism of the age, rejoiced that 'public welfare' was replacing" older philosophies. During the crisis of the Great Depression in the 1930s, some social workers feared the creation of a "permanent relief class," and President Roosevelt stated that he meant to get the federal government to "quit this business of relief." Although the "early welfare state" offered "categorical assistance for the needy over sixty-five, blind people, and dependent children," Patterson writes that a "distaste for welfare" persisted. When general prosperity returned during the 1940s, according to Patterson, it was "mainly the result of heavy government spending during World War II." That led to renewed optimism about ending poverty through economic growth, alone, and it was not until the early 1960s, as Patterson puts it, that Americans "rediscovered" poverty. By 1960, Patterson writes, urban areas "became the main locus of poverty." In 1962, social reformer Michael Harrington wrote about "a 'new' hard-core poor of old people, female-headed households, and minority groups." For them, according to critics of the system, welfare was inadequate. Since the 1960s, and, indeed, throughout the 20th century, a principle issue has been how to provide for the "deserving" needy without encouraging a culture of welfare dependence. Patterson returns to this problem several times, and it remains at the core of the poverty problem. Early in 1964, Lyndon Johnson declared a "war on poverty," the most ambitious effort to attack the problem since the New Deal era. According to Patterson, Johnson "looked upon his program as a way of lessening welfare dependency." The Johnson administration's efforts did not eradicate poverty, but, according to Patterson, it "had the unanticipated consequence of helping to arouse the poor." Concomitantly, the attitudes of middle-class Americans hardened, and, Patterson writes, they "continued to stereotype the poor disparagingly and to recoil at the thought of expanding welfare." Between 1965 and 1975, there was an "explosive growth of the welfare rolls, of AFDC," and critics "blamed AFDC for contributing to illegitimacy and family breakup." Furthermore, there was the longstanding concern that "categorical assistance programs destroyed people's incentives to work." By about 1970, as Patterson puts it, there was a "fundamental idea that America had a 'welfare crisis'" and this idea was buttressed by what Patterson describes as an "explosion in welfare rolls." Patterson writes: "The Carter administration struggled to find an approach that could accommodate liberals and mollify conservatives," but "Carter's welfare program bogged down in Congress." The Reagan administration did not fare much better, and, several years after he left office, President Reagan

stated: "We fought a war on poverty, and poverty won." The result, according to Patterson, was "continued stalemate and frustration." In Patterson's view: "The deepest structural problem of the late 1980s and early 1990s, most experts agreed, was the sluggishness of the American economy." In 1992, Bill Clinton campaigned on a promise "to end welfare as we know it." But in the mid-1990s, Patterson writes, policy-makers were still reaching for "the elusive goal of ensuring more substantial economic opportunity and security for all citizens." Patterson concludes on this pessimistic note: "Barring substantial improvements in the economy, poverty seemed likely to persist as one of the ugliest blights on American society." Patterson ably demonstrates that the history of poverty programs in the United States is controversial and very complicated. Nevertheless, some clear themes emerge. Until 1929, there was a general optimism that continuous growth of the American economy was inevitable. The Great Depression destroyed that assumption. Massive government spending in preparation for and during World War II restored general prosperity, but segments of the population remained locked in near-perpetual poverty. There is now a nearly-universal consensus for social programs for the needy over age 65, blind people, and dependent children, but this issue persists: What can be done to guarantee secure, well-paying jobs for all American adults who want, but cannot find, them? As Patterson makes clear in this lucid study, until that problem is solved, poverty will continue to be one of the great concerns of American society.

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