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# Paul Ryan Is a Charlatan, Not a Serious 'Policy Wonk'

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When will the mainstream media stop taking Congressman Paul Ryan seriously as a "thinker" and "policy wonk"?

Yes, he's chair of the House Budget Committee and one-time Vice Presidential candidate who is now laying the groundwork for a presidential run in 2016. But that just means he's an ambitious pol, not a smart policy maven.

When Mitt Romney introduced Ryan as his running mate who years ago, he described Ryan as an ["intellectual leader of the Republican Party."](#) In the conservative magazine *Commentary*, [James Pethokoukis wrote](#) that "It's probably safe to assume that no elected official in America understands the ins and outs of the labyrinthine U.S. budget the way Paul Ryan does."

This hyperbole might be expected from the right-wing echo chamber, but the mainstream press quickly adopted the same perspective.

A McClatchey news story [described](#) Ryan as a "policy wonk" and a "conservative thinker." The *Daily Beast* called Ryan a ["number-crunching policy wonk."](#) With a bit more distance, the *Los Angeles Times* [reported](#) that Ryan "hopes to position himself as the party's big thinker in advance of a possible 2016 presidential run"

For too long, reporters have been bamboozled by Ryan, who claims to be a both a budget expert and something of a social philosopher. But he's just a slick talker who appears to have flunked basic math in high school or college, because his budget numbers never add up.

Throughout the 2012 campaign, reporters kept asking Ryan to explain his draconian budget, but he could never provide a coherent answer. His stump speech was little more than

warmed-over babble about the evils of "big government", the importance of being "self sufficient" and the dangers of people becoming dependent on government instead of lifting oneself up by one's bootstraps.

His most popular metaphor was the anti-poverty programs had failed because instead of being a safety net they'd become a "hammock," robbing people of their self-esteem and initiative.

Ryan -- a millionaire who made his money the old-fashioned way, by [marrying a wealthy wife](#) who inherited her fortune -- worships at the altar of novelist Ayn Rand, the philosopher of you're-on-your-own selfishness, whose books have been required reading for his Congressional staffers.

Ryan has made his reputation [demonizing poor people](#). Not surprisingly, he wants to slash programs that help low-income families and children. Last year he was pushing a plan that would have thrown an estimated two million children, elderly, and disabled Americans off food stamps.

Despite this, the mainstream media have continued to give Ryan credit for being a serious budget guru and social policy expert. This can be seen in their reaction to Ryan's release on Monday of a 205-page [report](#) on the history of anti-poverty programs, going back a half century to President Johnson's Great Society programs, which concluded that they had failed. The report examines eight types of federal anti-poverty programs: food aid, social services, housing, cash aid, education and job training, energy, health care, and veterans affairs.

In the report, Ryan claims that federal programs have contributed to the nation's high poverty rate and created a "poverty trap." According to the report, "Federal programs are not only failing to address the problem. They are also in some significant respects making it worse."

The report was meant to justify Ryan's proposed budget, which would slash anti-poverty programs like food stamps, family assistance, college aid, child care subsidies, and housing vouchers. Ryan, who has also opposed extending unemployment insurance to the long-term

jobless and raising the minimum wage, claimed that social science findings support his view that these programs have failed.

The headline in *TIME* magazine read: "[Paul Ryan Critiques War on Poverty In New Report: Claims federal healthcare, nutrition and education programs have failed to address U.S. poverty rate.](#)"

The *Los Angeles Times* headlined its story: "[Paul Ryan calls for cuts to anti-poverty programs](#)"

*Bloomberg News*' headline told readers: "[Paul Ryan Sees \\$799 Billion War on Poverty Failing Poor.](#)"

The *Washington Post* headline echoed the same point: "Ryan Report Questions Efficacy Of Anti-Poverty Programs" (although it was retitled "[House GOP budget will focus on reforming welfare, overhauling social programs](#)" on the website). The article said that Ryan's report provided an "often stinging" evaluation of government anti-poverty efforts.

CNN's version was "[Paul Ryan Wages War on the War on Poverty.](#)"

The *National Journal* headlined its article, "[Ryan Says Some Poverty Programs are Hurting the Poor.](#)"

These headlines are both accurate and misleading at the same time. Ryan did say that anti-poverty programs hurt the poor. But neither the headlines nor the news stories in the mainstream media managed to tell readers the most important fact about Ryan's report. He's wrong.

The reporters didn't bother to contact any social science experts who might have explained that Ryan's report was full of holes. For all its footnotes, the report got it wrong, mostly by misquoting and misinterpreting studies that examine the impact of a wide variety of anti-poverty programs.

To cite just one example: Ryan's report cited a [study](#) published in December by Columbia University's Population Research Center measuring poverty trends since the War on Poverty began in the 1960s. Columbia Professor Jane Waldfogel and her colleagues looked at an alternative measure of the poverty rate known as the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which factors in government benefits like food stamps and programs like the earned-income

tax credit. They found that the poverty rate fell from 26 percent in 1967 to 15 percent in 2012. But Ryan only cited data from 1969 onward, ignoring a full 36 percent of the decline.

"It's technically correct, but it's an odd way to cite the research," Waldfogel told *Fiscal Times*. "In my experience, usually you use all of the available data. There's no justification given. It's unfortunate because it really understates the progress we've made in reducing poverty."

*Fiscal Times* didn't ask Waldfogel what grade she'd have given Ryan if he handed in his poverty manifesto for a class, but several professors I consulted said that Ryan's report would have earned him a D in their courses.

It wouldn't have been difficult for reporters to find out that Ryan's report was bogus. Since we recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of LBJ's War on Poverty, there have been many reports and [commentaries](#) by academics and [think tanks](#) examining the history and legacy of these anti-poverty programs.

The well-respected Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has been evaluating anti-poverty programs for years and has plenty of experts ready to talk to the press. On Tuesday the CBPP released a report, "[Ryan Report Distorts Safety Net's Picture](#)." The CBPP concluded that the Ryan report is "replete with misleading and selective presentations of data and research, which it uses to portray the safety net in a negative light. It also omits key research and data that point in more positive directions."

Although mainstream media reporters have been slow to expose Ryan's sham report, other media outlets have been more responsible and vigilant, interviewing policy experts (some of whom said that Ryan's report misquoted them), examining studies with real data, and identifying serious problems with the Ryan manifesto.

*Mother Jones'* Stephanie Mencimer: "[Paul Ryan's Superficial Critique of Federal Poverty Programs](#)"

*New York* magazine's Jonathan Chait: "[Paul Ryan Tries to Enlist Social Science to Back Up His Poverty Plan, Disaster Ensues](#)"

*The Wire's* Philip Bump: "[Paul Ryan's Wonk Image Gets Fact-Checked](#)."

*The Fiscal Times'* Rob Garver: "[Economists Say Paul Ryan Misrepresented Their Research](#)".

*Slate's* Jordan Weissmann: "[It's a Trap! Paul Ryan's theory of poverty is tricky--and wrong.](#)"

*New York Times* columnist (and Nobel Prize-winning economist) Paul Krugman weighed in "[The Real Poverty Trap](#)." Rather than call the Wisconsin Congressman a liar, Krugman was a bit more gentle, pointing out that social science research "doesn't actually support the claims" in Ryan's report. But so far the *Times'* news pages haven't called Ryan on the carpet.

In fact, no major mainstream newspaper, magazine, or TV network news show has exposed Ryan's report for the misleading hatchet job that it is. Hardly a "policy wonk," Ryan is simply a right-wing hack with strong convictions but no real facts to back them up.

Nothing that Ryan is saying these days differs significantly from what he's been saying for the past few years, but the lazy mainstream media keep giving him a free pass.

Two years ago, in his speech to the GOP convention in Tampa, Ryan told a story about how, after his father's death, his mother "got on a bus every weekday for years, and rode 40 miles each morning to Madison."

"She earned a new degree and learned new skills to start her small business. It wasn't just a new livelihood. It was a new life. And it transformed my Mom from a widow in grief to a small businesswoman whose happiness wasn't just in the past. Her work gave her hope. It made our family proud. And to this day, my Mom is my role model."

Ryan meant this as a celebration of his mother's lift-herself-by-her-own-bootstraps spirit. Ryan didn't seem to realize that the bus was a public service, that the road was built and maintained by government, and that the University of Wisconsin in Madison is a public institution.

Reporters aren't psychiatrists. Nobody expects them to look into Ryan's soul, or his heart, or his emotional make-up. But it isn't too much to ask reporters to look into Ryan's budget numbers and policy reports and let the public know that the would-be president is hardly a serious "policy wonk." He's a charlatan.

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