

# Critical Dialogue

## **The Workfare State: Public Assistance Politics from the New Deal to the New Democrats.** By Eva Bertram.

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— Rebecca U. Thorpe, *University of Washington*

In recent decades, growing numbers of Americans have faced precarious job markets, stagnant wages, large debt burdens, and soaring rents, all factors fueling a widening income gap and contributing to a vanishing middle class. Political and economic elites have failed to adequately navigate these changes, and the bill for this neglect is paid with increasing economic inequality, heightened distrust of government, and deep political divisions. Eva Bertram's *The Workfare State* carefully examines the emergence and persistence of one core component of this policy failure: a system of social protection that ties income assistance to employment.

Bertram questions why U.S. federal policy addresses poverty by mandating work, despite increasingly unstable work conditions. Her explanation is rooted in the structure of the Southern economy and dynamics of the U.S. two-party system: Divisions in the Democratic Party and the low-wage Southern labor market explain why political leaders “rewrote the social contract for poor families between the 1960s and 1990s” (p. 4). Thoroughly researched and carefully argued, this study reveals that the demise of need-based welfare entitlements and the persistence of a work-based approach to public assistance is not principally the result of Republican-led retrenchments or party polarization. Rather, from inception to implementation, workfare is by and large a Democratic project. Although Democratic policymakers typically support redistribution more than Republicans do, and workers tend to fare better under Democratic administrations (Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, 2008), Democratic initiatives exacerbated inequality by creating and entrenching a workfare state.

Bertram draws on historical analysis of legislative records paired with quantitative data capturing partisan and regional divisions on key roll call votes to make this argument. She begins by examining the New Deal origins of federal welfare provisions, though the bulk of the book traces the chronology of workfare from the 1960s to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, with particular

emphasis on the pivotal role of conservative Southern Democrats. A few trends stand out.

First, public assistance began as a “thin entitlement,” not a robust welfare state. The 1935 Social Security Act provided aid to the elderly, single mothers with dependent children, and the blind and disabled—populations all broadly labeled “unemployable.” Notably, Southern Democrats did not launch an assault on the welfare state as such, but rather on specific provisions that affected the region’s disproportionately black low-wage labor force. While Southern states used their discretionary authority to allocate relatively generous provisions for the elderly poor and disabled, the same jurisdictions marginalized aid to families with dependent children (AFDC, formerly Aid to Dependent Children [ADC]) and sharply restricted access on the basis of race and class. Employing legal loopholes, caseworkers routinely refused aid to unmarried mothers on the pretense of “unsuitable” home life, and disproportionately excluded black families by labeling parents “employable”—a strategy used not only to deny benefits but also to shore up seasonal labor and domestic service markets.

Second, in the 1960s and 1970s, Southern Democrats used their veto power to chip away at cash assistance for poor families and replace it with coercive labor requirements, while reinforcing public support for the elderly and disabled. In one of the most intriguing aspects of the analysis, Bertram delves into the legislative battles over President Richard Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan (FAP)—an alternative to the controversial AFDC that would extend federal benefits to all poor families. After securing passage in the House, a coalition of moderates and conservative Democrats in the Senate successfully framed the debate as welfare (entitlement to cash assistance) versus workfare (coercive labor) and killed the “welfare” bill in favor of work. Although the South comprised half of all poor families nationwide (and two-thirds of poor black families) and was slated to benefit from the influx of federal funds, the bill also threatened the region’s stratified economy and white supremacist order (p. 71). Southern conservatives feared that Nixon’s FAP would provide low-wage workers with the ability to refuse jobs or working conditions. At the same time, an income guarantee would undercut threats wielded by employers to withhold pay as a tactic to prevent Southern blacks from exercising political power. As a result, Southern Democrats

opposed cash assistance for the poor and threw their support behind Supplemental Security Income (SSI) (thereby creating new federal programs for the elderly and disabled while excluding poor families and children) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) (thereby providing tax subsidies for working poor families while excluding the nonworking poor and the working poor without children).

Political efforts to weaken traditional welfare programs culminated when Democratic President Bill Clinton and the Republican-controlled Congress institutionalized workfare in 1996. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) ended federal entitlements to public assistance in favor of state discretion and mandated work requirements for most welfare recipients.

Finally, Bertram provides meticulous evidence that what was left of social insurance after a barrage of political retrenchments was hollowed out by structural economic changes since the 1970s. New Deal welfare architects relied on the principle of work (with a public assistance safety net only as a last resort) based on an assumption that employment would mitigate poverty. However, since the 1970s, the decline of unions, increasingly stratified labor markets, falling or stagnant wages, and declining pension and health benefits in low-wage sectors confounded the New Deal model. While economic growth in the 1990s masked many of the inadequacies of workfare, the 2008 recession amplified its shortcomings when work was not readily available.

While there is much to admire about *The Workfare State*, there are also several limitations. First, while the notion that workfare is principally a Democratic project is convincing, it obscures crucial changes in the composition of the political parties. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Democratic Party included liberals and conservatives in their ranks. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, conservative Southern Democrats had moved into the Republican Party, which became more ideologically homogenous, unified, and aggressive in its assault on need-based welfare programs. Rather, a more surprising disjuncture that Bertram's analysis reveals is the shift among moderate and liberal Democrats from a principled (if futile) battle for welfare entitlements to entrenched support for workfare standards. This is nowhere more evident than when Senator Chuck Schumer, currently the highest elected official in the Democratic Party, set forth the party's vision for young Americans facing economic anxieties: tax credits for employers and training for workers (Chuck Schumer, "A Better Deal for American Workers," *New York Times*, 24 July 2017).

Second, the analysis obscures the nation's broader history of social provision. Workfare is aptly characterized as a retrenchment, but this is based on the New Deal welfare standard. A more extensive time frame would reveal that opposition to public assistance for the poorest among us is the norm—despite intermittent reforms for

the elderly, disabled, veterans, and widows (Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 1996; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 1995). Moreover, Social Security, the GI bill, and the Affordable Care Act have also been limited and hollowed out for the poor and racially marginalized, even when representatives imposing such limits lack majority control of Congress.

Finally, Bertram would strengthen her case by theorizing race and gender beyond the South. While she appropriately portrays workfare as an effort to uphold the Southern economic and political order, liberal Democrats also used work as an instrument to transform "destructive dependents" into "constructive citizens." Notably, Robert Self skillfully characterizes Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty as an effort to rehabilitate predominantly black male breadwinners through job training and affirmative-action programs. Liberal Democrats promoted work as an antidote to social unrest, urban riots, and the "deviant" family structure of matriarchy and welfare (Robert Self, *All in the Family*, 2012). In the end, both liberals and conservatives converged on the principle of work and the patriarchal family.

The analysis also led me to more carefully consider social constructions of women and mothers. While work requirements for single mothers provide a measure of social control and uphold low-wage labor markets (p. 24), women's *unpaid* domestic labor is also central to the wage system. Conservative ideologies venerating white, upper-class women as free from the workplace and obligated to men and children reinforce this gendered division of labor—even while economic realities have made this standard impossible for most families (see Wendy Brown, *States of Injuries*, 1995). Working-class women thus increasingly face a "double-bind," confined simultaneously to both low-wage work and unremunerated domestic labor.

In short, *The Workfare State* provides a thoughtful and cogent analysis, and an incisive and sobering reminder that a two-tiered system of social provision is a core legacy of the Democratic Party. Middle-class beneficiaries of the New Deal welfare state enjoy employment-based health insurance, pensions, and Social Security benefits, while the working poor rely on stop-gap protections such as EITC and Medicaid. As Bertram makes clear, workfare has ultimately widened inequalities, while leaving the neediest among us with the lowest levels of protection.

**Response to Rebecca Thorpe's review of *The Workfare State: Public Assistance Politics from the New Deal to the New Democrats***

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— Eva Bertram

Rebecca Thorpe has provided a thoughtful and astute review of my book, and I greatly appreciate her insights. Three points merit a response.

The review emphasizes, rightly, the need to ground any analysis of workfare within a clear understanding of “the nation’s broader history of social provision.” Thorpe’s point that a longer time horizon reveals that “opposition to public assistance for the poorest among us is the norm” is well established in the literature. It informs the book’s historical narrative of policy development, from the deficiencies of Progressive-Era precursors to federal welfare programs, to the echoes of English Poor Law principles in debates in the 1960s, to the inadequacies of policy responses to the Great Recession. It is the promise of a departure from this historical norm, I argue, that makes the New Deal (even with its limitations) an appropriate starting point for an inquiry into the shift from welfare to workfare. The relevant historical question, taken up in *The Workfare State*, is how and why core elements of the New Deal approach were dismantled rather than shored up in subsequent decades, and why the Democratic Party—proud architects of the New Deal—played a leading role in the process.

The review also raises a concern about whether the analysis of the Democratic role in building workfare “obscures crucial changes in the composition of the political parties” that occurred as Southerners left the Democratic Party for the Republican Party in the 1980s and 1990s. These shifts in party composition were indeed substantial and consequential, and are detailed in my discussion of the elections of 1984 and 1994 (Chapters 6 and 7). But what was most important in transforming policy was not the migration of members from one party to the other, nor the hardening of the Republican position on social welfare. It was instead the shift in the Democratic Party’s position, driven largely by Southern Democratic leaders over several decades, and the alliances they struck with Southern Republicans in the 1990s. On issues of work and welfare, the regional realignment and ideological polarization of the parties did not sharpen the debate between divergent Republican and Democratic positions, as might have been expected. Instead, they created a new middle ground, forged by Southerners from both parties and legislated in the 1990s. The policy outcome—including an expanded EITC program and the dismantlement of AFDC—was closer to the positions held by Southern Democratic congressional leaders in the 1970s than to the stated policy positions of either party at the beginning of the 1990s.

Finally, the review’s call for “theorizing race and gender beyond the South” is an excellent one, and the point that liberal Democrats (as well as Southern conservatives) have embraced work incentives and requirements is well taken. The policy debates over the Public Welfare Amendments, Work Experience and Training program, and Family Support Act (examined in Chapters 1 and 5) demonstrate that many liberal Democrats reached for policies to promote work not only as a matter of compromise with conservatives but also because they saw work as a quick fix

to urban unemployment, the rise in single-parent families, and other complex social challenges rooted in unresolved racial and gender hierarchies. Both my book and Thorpe’s review of it remind us that the dilemmas raised by workfare policies—ultimately embraced by conservatives and liberals alike—have long reflected the double standards and double binds confronting poor women and people of color who are caught between rising work requirements in public assistance and an unforgiving low-wage labor market.

Thorpe’s reference to Senator Schumer’s op-ed provides a fitting conclusion to this exchange. It underscores the fact that issues of work and welfare remain pressing and unresolved, as Democratic leaders seek to recapture the mantle of a party that can level the playing field for working families, while the current administration seeks to advance workfare through new work requirements on safety-net programs ranging from food stamps to Medicaid.

**The American Warfare State: The Domestic Politics of Military Spending.** By Rebecca U. Thorpe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 248p. \$81.00 cloth, \$29.00 paper.  
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— Eva Bertram, *University of California–Santa Cruz*

Rebecca Thorpe opens her book with a big question. How did the United States—constructed on a deep suspicion of professional militaries, foreign entanglements, and concentrated war powers—end up with the world’s most powerful armed forces, mounting defense budgets, and a habit of far-flung military interventions led by presidents of both parties? Thorpe’s route into this question is through a close examination of the changing role of Congress in military policy since the nation’s founding. She draws on new and innovative data sources to expose shifts in the incentives and interests of legislators and the ways in which these have, in turn, altered the opportunities and constraints facing the executive. *The American Warfare State* makes a number of signal contributions.

Most importantly, Thorpe offers a persuasive and detailed analysis of why the United States has sustained such high levels of defense spending since World War II, despite numerous shifts in party control of government and the rise and fall of national security threats. For most of the country’s history, she points out, the size of U.S. forces and spending levels dropped sharply after major conflicts or changes in the threat environment. But the pattern ended with World War II. The war’s end did not trigger the expected reduction in spending, nor did the end of the Korean or Vietnam conflicts or the Cold War. What changed?

The author’s research provides rich and wide-ranging insights on the subject. Her central contribution lies in a claim about the political economy of defense spending.

Thorpe shows that the unprecedented mobilization for World War II led to the emergence of major military industries beyond traditional metropolitan defense hubs. In every decade since, defense expenditures continued to spread to new communities. The result was a vast increase in the number of Americans whose jobs or local economies depend on defense dollars. She then makes a shrewd analytic intervention. She demonstrates that the impact of defense contracts falls unevenly on local economies, exerting an outsized effect on less populated, less economically diverse semirural and rural communities (p. 179). To assess the political impact of this development, Thorpe marshals evidence that members of Congress from these defense-reliant districts are more active on military issues, more supportive of continued high spending levels, and more reluctant to withdraw funding from military operations than are their colleagues, including those within their own party whose ideological inclinations they share. As the benefits of military spending grew and spread, she adds, the costs were deferred or displaced, in part through increased deficit spending (pushing costs onto future taxpayers) and the creation of an all-volunteer military (shifting the burden of service to a limited segment of the population).

In developing this argument, Thorpe's book sheds new light on institutions and interbranch relations in the postwar era. The framers of the Constitution, she reminds us, explicitly divided military authority between Congress and the president: The legislature's power to raise armies, declare war, and control funding was designed as an institutional constraint on executive ambitions. The author's central insight, a second major contribution of the book, is that this system of checks and balances rests on a structure of incentives that has collapsed in the years since World War II.

Given the lack of a standing army (soldiers were provided by state militias) and military production infrastructure (weapons were largely bought from foreign manufacturers), and given the limits on federal fiscal capacity (due to a narrow tax base and limited ability to borrow), early presidents had to appeal to Congress for military resources. Because legislators had to extract these resources from constituents through increased taxes, the founders assumed that lawmakers would grant funds and authority only in extraordinary circumstances, in amounts that were absolutely necessary, and for as short a time as possible. This logic facilitated rapid demobilization and spending reductions in the aftermath of conflicts from the Revolutionary War through World War I.

Incentives began to shift in the nineteenth century, however, with the rise of domestic weapons production, the capacity of the federal government to cover costs by printing money or taking on debt, and a more professional standing army. But it took the creation of

a permanent and geographically widespread military apparatus for World War II to decisively shift the underlying congressional logic, as local economic imperatives "created new legislative incentives to procure ongoing defense resources, rather than demobilizing as had occurred after previous wars" (p. 183). Thorpe's critical analytic contribution is to show how this shift in incentives undercuts the legislature's capacity to serve as a check on the executive. Legislators' interests in preserving their constituents' jobs not only leads to permanent and unnecessary levels of defense spending (independent of national security threats), she argues, but also erodes Congress's capacity to exercise control over the military through budgetary constraints. Her analysis is thus at once a persuasive account of when and why institutional constraints may fail, and a detailed chronicle of an important historical shift in interbranch relations.

In addition to these substantive contributions, the book provides a first-rate example of effective and well-designed mixed-methods research. It includes extensive original research, including a data set of locations of major defense industries in every state and congressional district, and a tracking of defense subcontract expenditures by congressional district, along with county-level estimations of local economic diversity. Thorpe presents evidence of the effects of defense reliance on the committee-assignment choices and voting records of members of Congress, on issues from defense spending and arms sales (in the 1990s) to authorization and continued funding for the war in Iraq (in the 2000s). On the qualitative side, the book reflects close readings of historical sources and early debates over the Constitution, as well as well-crafted historical-institutional arguments addressing, for example, the respective roles and mutual impacts of economic factors and government policies in the expansion of America's military production capacities. The use and integration of this range of research methods in the service of a clear and carefully developed argument is a major accomplishment of the book.

*The American Warfare State*, in short, is impressive in both the scope and depth of its contributions. However, it also raises a number of issues and questions that merit further consideration and conversation among scholars of military and congressional politics.

First, the book goes some distance—but could elaborate further—on the question of where and how the incentive structure driving defense spending intersects with other explanations for military policy, particularly those focusing on the role of the executive rather than Congress. At several points, Thorpe notes that "perpetual military mobilization skews the institutional playing field heavily in favor of the executive" (p. 137), and facilitates but does not determine the increased use of force abroad. In a few places, however, she seems to subsume a range of factors driving executive military action under her core

explanation for increased defense spending, arguing, for example, that “[h]eightedened executive ambition, legislative atrophy, and expansive interpretations of the president’s constitutional war powers are all symptomatic of a new underlying incentive structure” (p. 180). These factors have multiple sources, some tied (but not reducible) to changed congressional incentives, others not.

The argument is most persuasive when the author acknowledges that increased opportunities and reduced constraints do not in themselves determine or explain whether or how those capacities are used or toward what ends, and explores interactions with the fuller range of factors that inform executive (and congressional) decisions (p. 131). The brief mention in her conclusion that the rising economic imperatives at the center of her analysis “coincided with the emerging dominance of a political ideology that views American military supremacy as a moral force for good” (p. 180) is an example of an insight ripe for fuller development and integration within her argument.

Finally, two of the work’s most innovative contributions—about economic reliance and institutional failure—raise intriguing issues for further scholarship and debate. Thorpe’s central insight about the political significance of (and variations in) local economic dependence on government spending is, at one level, a powerful explanatory argument about the scale and development of the nation’s military apparatus. But it is also presented as a “theory of economic reliance” (p. 23), and this poses two interesting questions. First, what are the limits of the theory in explaining defense spending trends, particularly in light of the fact that many members of Congress are not from defense-reliant districts? Second, how generalizable is it? What are the prospects for applying the concept of economic reliance to other policy arenas? Does it provide any leverage, for example, in understanding the politics of health care? This is another area of government spending that is vitally important in many communities, and in which local economic interests (as well as the interests of constituents) often run contrary to the positions of those members of Congress committed to limiting spending for ideological and partisan reasons.

The argument about institutional failure, likewise, has far-reaching implications. Thorpe’s research demonstrates that members of Congress often act according to a structure of individual interests and incentives defined by constituent and partisan pressures, in ways that undermine Congress’s institutional check on executive military action. Under what conditions, if any, will Congress defend its institutional prerogatives against the military ambitions of the executive? Can the institution function as more than the sum of its parts (i.e., the interests and incentives of its individual members)? What can we learn from the experience of the War Powers Resolution and subsequent congressional efforts

to limit unpopular military operations? If, as Thorpe writes in the book’s final sentence, “[i]nstitutional checks and competing interests do not reliably limit power or promote the public good” (p. 185), where might we look for solutions? Are there institutional reforms that could restore the congressional constraint, or does the answer lie outside of the system of checks and balances?

Many of these questions reach beyond the scope of Thorpe’s project and are markers of success, not indicators of shortcomings, in the work. *The American Warfare State* does exactly what a groundbreaking book should do: It provides new evidence and analysis in a cogent argument, and leaves readers mulling new questions, provoked by its findings, about larger implications and future research agendas in American politics.

### Response to Eva Bertram’s review of *The American Warfare State: The Domestic Politics of Military Spending*

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— Rebecca Thorpe

I am very grateful to Eva Bertram for her perceptive and thought-provoking review of my book. I will focus my response on the three provocative questions that she raises.

First, I appreciate the opportunity to expand on alternative explanations for U.S. defense spending and the role of overlapping incentives. My central argument in *The American Warfare State* is that the United States developed and perpetuated the most powerful military in history because World War II military mobilization extended defense benefits widely, and many rural and semirural areas became economically reliant on defense-sector jobs and capital. Meanwhile, policies have shifted the burdens historically associated with large military establishments and warfare onto a small minority of soldiers who volunteer to fight, future generations who will inherit the nation’s war debts, and foreign populations where U.S. wars take place.

Of course, support for large defense budgets is not simply reducible to economic interests. Policymakers also project American military muscle to promote their ideological, partisan, and national security goals. However, I found that these commitments often overlap with economic imperatives and tend to advance mutually reinforcing goals. While presidents exercise force for a variety of reasons, the heightened importance of defense spending reinforces military solutions to foreign policy problems. Nonetheless, Bertram’s insight that economic prerogatives alone cannot determine when or why executives are likely to use force is astute and valid.

Second, Bertram raises incisive queries about the limitations of economic reliance as an explanation for

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defense spending, and whether the concept is generalizable to other policy realms. The theory of local reliance suggests that defense funds are a particularly important source of jobs, revenue, and capital in geographically remote areas that lack diverse economies. Just as members from agricultural, automobile or oil-dependent districts support widely shared local interests, the most consistent legislative supporters of military spending and war are overrepresented in areas that are inordinately reliant on the defense funds they receive.

Although the size and scale of the defense industry dwarfs most government-funded sectors, the proliferation of one-company towns is likely to have similar economic and political consequences. In fact, evidence suggests that rural reliance on prison infrastructure heightens political support for punitive sentencing laws and militates against criminal justice reforms (Rebecca U. Thorpe, "Perverse Politics," *Perspectives on Politics*, 13(3), 2015).

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, are there viable political reforms that might help fortify Congress's prerogatives and restrain executive independence in matters concerning warfare? On the one hand, I am not particularly sanguine that institutional remedies are

sufficient. Rather, I argue that a political system predicated on "ambition . . . made to counteract ambition" has transmogrified to an arrangement where legislators' interests in large defense budgets consolidate executive authority over the world's most powerful military. On the other hand, however, I am reminded of James Madison's enduring eighteenth-century wisdom in his "Universal Peace" (1792): To minimize unnecessary or reckless wars, those responsible for declaring war must be made to incur the direct costs.

Restoring a universal military draft, mandatory tax hikes, and shared public sacrifices may reinforce a "democratic brake" on questionable wars and put more pressure on representatives to reassert their authority over military policy. However, popular opposition may militate against these reforms. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that unrestrained executive military ambition is not the result of a coup, executive power grab, or even a particularly feckless Congress; rather, it is the result of a system that promotes the short-term interests of a critical mass of voters and legislators. Perhaps in a democracy the onus is on the people to demand greater political responsibility and congressional fortitude.