This book is mainly about the actions we have taken and not taken over the past four decades that either benefit or hurt low-income people in America. The hardcover edition went to press in the fall of 2000 before we knew who would be the next president. I didn’t have much confidence that a Bush presidency would be good for low-income people, so I didn’t celebrate all the national policy coups that we could pull off in the near future. Instead, I emphasized that there is a continuing agenda for local civic participation and public policy, regardless of who is president. In fact, I believe one of the strengths of this book is its discussion of that agenda.

Meanwhile, Governor Bush became President Bush. I have to say, even though I thought I had no illusions, Mr. Bush has been a disappointment, to put it mildly.

The worst thing has been his tax cut. This is pure Reaganomics: Slash the revenue base and then shed crocodile tears over our newfound inability to find the money to meet pressing national needs. Universal health coverage? Sorry. No need even to have a discussion about it because we don’t have the money. Child care help for every family that can’t afford the full cost of good child care? Too bad. Love to consider it but we just can’t afford it.
Of course, it’s not just that there was a big tax cut. Equally awful, and maybe worse, is that it mostly benefits the wealthiest people who had no need whatever to have their taxes cut. During the prosperity of the ’90s they received big gains in income—not only their gross income, but what remained after they paid taxes. Their effective tax rates actually went down. Over the course of the ’90s, the ratio of compensation of CEOs of big companies to the wages of line workers increased from 45:1 to 458:1. Of course, the facts didn’t matter when it came to doing politics.

I’ve tried to figure out why 80 percent of the American people allowed a tax cut to pass through Congress that overwhelmingly goes into the pockets of the other 20 percent. (After much lobbying by advocates, the new tax cut did provide a few crumbs for low-income workers in the form of a partially refundable child tax credit—in other words, a modest payment to workers with children whose wages are too low to make them liable for federal income taxes.) Did the American public think that the mind-boggling and apparently never-ending multi-trillion-dollar surplus that we kept hearing about would always be there no matter how much we gave away? Were they so sick of Bill Clinton and his parting gift of pardons for undeserving felons that they were willing to give a new president free rein to do whatever he wanted? Did they think that they were going to acquire a rich uncle who was then going to die and leave them his fortune, tax-free? Or was it just a normal part of a new president’s honeymoon?

Whatever it was, it was bad. I guess we were supposed to feel better when President Bush told us that we didn’t need money to help poor people because his faith-based initiative was going to take care of them. It all came together in the _Washington Post_ on May 21, 2001. The headline was, “President Urges War on Poverty.” When I read it I thought maybe I’d been kidnapped by a mad professor during the night and sent back to the ’60s, or maybe my neighbor had snuck out and substituted one of his
collections of old newspapers. Then I saw another headline on the same page, “Bush Tax Cut Pares Government Role.” That was, shall we say, an “interesting” juxtaposition; I then realized that I was definitely looking at the real newspaper for May 21, 2001.

The first story was a prototypical example of the now-familiar Bush pattern of using sympathetic rhetoric and then brazenly doing the exact opposite. The president had delivered the commencement speech at Notre Dame University, where he had described his faith-based initiative as a new war on poverty. The second article, more news analysis than news, reported the serious impact that Mr. Bush’s tax cut was going to have on the federal government’s capacity to help meet future societal needs. Somebody at the Post had seen the hypocrisy.

If the new administration’s modus operandi hadn’t yet become clear, it was now. For “compassionate conservative,” read BOGUS. Conservative, yes, but compassionate? Only in rhetoric. It is the Bush equivalent of Clinton’s now-famous remark, “I feel your pain.”

The faith-based initiative fell out of the news after September 11, 2001, but it’s still very much a part of the president’s rhetorical tool kit and it’s still the stuff of the photo ops that he does regularly. And the Supreme Court’s decision that it is constitutional to have vouchers for children to attend parochial schools adds strength to the push for more faith-based programs. This issue hasn’t disappeared.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with people helping other people because their religious faith impels them to do so. Nor is there anything wrong with using public money to do it, as long as there are safeguards to avoid constitutional problems. We’ve been providing public funds to religiously affiliated nonprofit organizations like Catholic Charities for decades. What is wrong is implying that faith-based work, whether by volunteers or by people who are paid, is a complete solution to poverty. Voluntarism is never enough, although it is very impor-
tant for people to volunteer. Social services, even if adequately funded, are not a full answer, either, and faith-based social services are only one category of social services in any case. It’s hard to deliver universal health coverage in a faith-based package. A living wage doesn’t arrive in a faith-based package, either. What is also wrong is giving public money to people who use it to proselytize or to help only their own or to hire only their own. The Bush proposals, at least as originally framed, raise substantial constitutional questions.

The last big piece of President Bush’s 2001 agenda was his so-called “Leave No Child Behind” education legislation. If fully funded (and this is a big if), this program could make a positive difference in localities if the money is used well. More likely, though, it will leave large numbers of children behind. As has become typical with Mr. Bush, the way to understand the effects of his policies is to study his rhetoric and infer the opposite. Too many children will fail the tests required by the law because they will not have been afforded the education that is supposed to precede the tests.

So, by the end of 2001, President Bush’s approach to low-income people consisted of a tiny bit of added tax relief if they were employed, a self-inflicted paucity of resources to make a serious investment in good public policy, the smoke-and-mirrors rhetoric of the faith-based initiative as a cure for all problems, and a potentially hollow and even dangerous piece of education legislation. Not very promising.

The new year, 2002, brought a new chapter that is not quite finished as I write this. The so-called “welfare reform” of 1996 was due to expire and therefore legislative action is needed to renew it and perhaps adjust it, based, one would hope, on experience. Since very nearly the beginning of the law’s implementation, the politicians who had enacted it patted themselves on the back and trumpeted its success, and the press largely accepted their assertions. The story was in fact much more complicated than
what was presented to the public, but it was at least sensible to assume that, whereas the political establishment (of both parties, given that this was Bill Clinton’s baby) would resist major changes to improve it, they would also resist major steps to make it worse.

Wrong. Conservative Democrats and President Bush hijacked the debate and turned it into a renewed argument over who was tougher on forcing mothers to work. Never mind that single mothers had gone to work in huge numbers (largely because jobs, albeit mainly low-wage jobs, were available, and partly, to be honest, because the tough time limits and sanctions did push some people who otherwise would have stayed on welfare to look for the available jobs). Never mind that the number of women on welfare had shrunk by more than half, to considerably below two million, and that a disproportionate number of those still on welfare had skill deficits or personal problems that required an individualized response if they were going to succeed in the workplace.

Never mind that when unemployment goes back up, as it has been doing steadily since late 2000, the last hired are the first fired, and then larger numbers of people begin to need welfare assistance (and more and more people become the victims of arbitrary lifetime time limits as things proceed).

Of course, forcing people to seek jobs that don’t exist has always been one of the right wing’s staple ideas, and it was the implicit premise of the 1996 law, which was “foiled” only because of the unexpected hot economy thereafter. The “success” of the 1996 law was entirely fortuitous, based on the circumstance that in the wake of its enactment unemployment rates dropped to lows not seen since the ’60s—below 3 percent in many states. (And few people ever talked about the large numbers of people who were made worse-off because they ended up neither working nor on welfare. These people were forced off the welfare rolls or couldn’t get on and also could not find a job or were not in a position to work.)
So, large numbers of women went to work, although this is not the same as saying they escaped poverty. Poll after poll showed that the public anger that had fueled the enactment of the 1996 law had disappeared. Nonetheless, for reasons I have never fully understood, Bruce Reed, who had been President Clinton’s top welfare adviser and cheerleader for the 1996 law and is now head of the center-right Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), along with his colleagues at the utterly misnamed Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), began writing policy papers calling for increases in work requirements. They said that a much higher percentage of those currently receiving assistance should be required to work while on welfare, and should be required to work longer hours than required by current law. It was entirely unnecessary but it was the centerpiece of their reauthorization platform.

Why did they do this? My best explanation is that this is about a metapolitics that has nothing to do with the intrinsic facts or even the short-term politics about welfare policy. The DLC and Clinton had dined out on remaking the Democratic party by appropriating the Republicans’ high-visibility hot buttons, especially welfare and crime. The Republicans had stolen the flag and the family from the Democrats, after all. Why shouldn’t the Democrats give the Republicans some of their own medicine? The difference was that when the Republicans stole symbols from the Democrats, they didn’t steal the substance. They just used the symbols as camouflage in which to wrap their long-held right-wing positions. The Democrats, by contrast, didn’t differentiate between the symbols and the substance; they took both.

By the DLC’s measure, the repositioning of the late ’80s and early ’90s had been a great success. Bill Clinton was elected and re-elected, and for them that was proof of their hypothesis. I think Bruce Reed said to himself, “we have to renew our vows, we have to stoke the fire of the center-right wing of the party, we have to keep ourselves in fighting trim for the presidential politics of 2004 and 2008.” So, even though there was no substan-
tive reason to get tougher on welfare, and even though there was no current demand from the public for getting tougher with welfare recipients, they revived the issue for longer-term political gain.

It is important to understand that the DLC/PPI proposals began to appear before President Bush’s reauthorization bill came out. My theory is that Karl Rove, Mr. Bush’s political adviser, and the White House welfare policy staff saw this and decided not to let any Democrats get to the right of the administration on welfare, no way. So far as anybody knew, the administration’s big issue for reauthorization was going to be to push welfare recipients to get married. Nobody had heard a peep from the White House about tougher work requirements. Nonetheless, when the Bush bill came out, the centerpiece was not pushing people into marriage (which, by the way, didn’t poll well) but work.

The proposal that emerged was that 70 percent of the people currently on welfare had to participate in work or work-related activities for 40 hours a week. (This came to be known as 70/40.) This would replace the current requirement that 50 percent of welfare recipients work for 30 hours a week. (The current law had some fine print that reduced the percentage of current recipients required to work in states where the numbers on welfare went down, which turned out to be almost everywhere, so the average number of current recipients working was about 23 percent nationally.)

Why was the Bush proposal so bad? Both for what it wasn’t and for what it was. The lessons from experience under the 1996 law were (1) former recipients who get low-wage jobs need continuing support to succeed in those jobs (especially child care and transportation, and maybe some added income) and to move up the job ladder, and (2) people still on welfare who face individual barriers to success in the job market need individualized help to move forward. In addition, restoring eligibility for legal
immigrants, letting recipients count education as satisfying work participation requirements, and fixing the child support system were items where experience showed that adjustment was warranted.

But, the Bush proposal pursued none of these aims. Instead, it created a costly straitjacket for the states. The only way for them to reach the 70/40 requirement would be to adopt so-called “workfare programs,” which are forced make-work programs in which recipients are assigned to do things to “earn” or “work off” their benefits. The research on such programs showed that they do little to help people find real work and get off welfare, and they are expensive to boot. The cost would crowd out spending on child care and other important supports that help people succeed in the job market. It was telling that, with all the flexibility of the 1996 law, not one state adopted a workfare program on a statewide basis. The only large jurisdiction to adopt a workfare program was New York City, and it was highly controversial. It was equally telling that the political party that had made state flexibility one of its middle names was now proposing to force the states to accept a new mandate. True to form, Bush cloaked his proposal in very different rhetoric when he talked about it publicly. In Charleston, South Carolina, on July 29, 2002, he described being a single mother as “the toughest job in America.” He didn’t explain that what he was proposing would make that job a whole lot tougher.

The Bush welfare proposal transformed the welfare debate. A coalition of grassroots organizations called the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support (in which I have been involved extensively), along with other advocates, had made considerable headway in laying the groundwork for an agenda to improve the 1996 law. They went from gathering momentum for a modestly positive agenda to playing mostly defense. Centrist Democrats started running for cover on the work issue, especially in the Senate where Senators Evan Bayh (R–Ind.) and Thomas Carper
(R–Del.) introduced the DLC/PPI bill which, while better than Bush on some issues, had work requirements quite similar to what the administration was pushing.

The House action was predictable and fell almost precisely along party lines. The Republicans rammed the Bush bill through; the Democrats stayed pretty much together around a good alternative developed under the leadership of Maryland Representative Benjamin Cardin, and attracted 198 votes for their bill. Of course, the Democrats lost, and few people were aware that, in fact, the House vote was quite close. The president’s bill was what emerged.

The focus then shifted to the Senate. The hope was (and still is, as of this writing) to get a good bill out of the Senate to be in the best position possible to bargain with the House when a conference committee meets to iron out the differences between the two bodies. Fragmentation was the order of the day in the Senate. This was good news in that no one pushed hard for the president’s proposals in their pure form, and a few Republicans had ideas rather different from the White House. It was bad news in that the Democrats were not united, and it was impossible to knit together a Democratic proposal that was as good as Mr. Cardin’s proposal had been in the House. Senators Bayh and Carper began with four cosponsors besides themselves, and their group was enlarged when Senators Hillary Clinton (NY), Joseph Lieberman (Conn.), and Bob Graham (Fla.) joined the bill in return for some modest adjustments in its provisions. The presence of nine Democrats advocating work requirements more stringent than those under current law complicated all of the efforts to develop a constructive proposal.

Beyond Bayh-Carper-Clinton et al., two groups emerged as the major forces in the Senate Finance Committee’s bill-drafting process, one outside the committee and the other within it. Democratic senators Edward Kennedy (Mass.), Paul Wellstone (Minn.), and Jon Corzine (NJ) spearheaded a letter to Finance Committee chair Max Baucus (Mont.) and ranking minority
member Charles Grassley (Iowa), which ultimately attracted twenty-four signatures and laid out a progressive agenda. Inside the committee, what became known as the tripartisan group drafted a centrist compromise that became the committee bill. (Senator James Jeffords [Vt.] was from the third “party,” since he is now an independent.) Republicans Olympia Snowe of Maine, Orrin Hatch (Utah), and Frank Murkowski (Alaska) joined with Senator Jeffords and all of the Democrats except Tom Daschle (S. Dak.) (who opposed the bill from the “left” because it did not contain enough funding for child care) to craft the bill that was reported out of committee.

The committee bill kept the work requirements largely as they are in current law, increased access to education and training, restored eligibility for legal immigrants, improved child support policies, and took a number of other constructive steps.

I write this in October 2002 just before the Senate adjourns for the fall elections. It now appears that there will be no final action before the year ends, and work on the bill will have to start all over again in the new Congress. This is what the Republicans prefer, thinking that they will do better in 2003 when there are more fiscal constraints and when they may (they hope) control both houses of Congress.

Whatever the ultimate outcome, it is by now quite clear that President George W. Bush cares little about low-income people in America. He actually mentioned the word “poverty” twice in his inaugural address, in stark contrast to his predecessor who seldom said the word, but we now know that Bush (or those who write the words he speaks and form the strategies he pursues) is a master at saying one thing and doing another.

So, the story continues. America’s poor got a little bump up from the hot economy in the last half of the ’90s, and public policy for the poor improved slightly during that decade (I am thinking particularly of the Earned Income Tax Credit), but the disparities between the very rich and all of the rest of us (not
just between the rich and the poor) widened hugely yet again over the same period of time.

The paradox of fabulous work going on in communities while the national picture is rather dismal continues, too. It’s been my privilege for the last two years to be a judge for the Ford Foundation’s wonderful new fellowship program, “Leadership for a Changing World,” which honors and gives wider visibility to people doing work for systemic change at the local level. The people I’ve met through that process are America’s heart: Sarah James, who is fighting on behalf of her Gwich’in Nation in Arctic Village, Alaska, to prevent oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; Gail Aska, a former welfare recipient, who with her colleagues at Community Voices Heard in East Harlem is organizing for-real welfare reform; Dianne Bady, who with her partners at the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition is struggling to stop mountaintop removal and other destructive coal mining practices; and LeeAnn Hall, who with the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations has managed to bring about positive policy change for low-income people in the ultraconservative political environment in Idaho. There were 3,000 applicants for the Ford award last year and 1,400 this year. Something good is going on across America.

The challenge remains to get a mass of Americans going far beyond those categorized as poor to recognize that they are getting the short end of the stick and that something can be done about the situation. On the one hand, the failure of America’s labor market keeps millions in low-wage jobs that make life a constant struggle. On the other hand, the wealthiest Americans do not pay their fair share and continue to succeed in convincing their elected representatives (and I emphasize the word “their”) to keep on letting them off the hook. These two sets of facts should have great political salience.

I have one voice, but for my part, I will continue to speak what I believe to be the truth.
Since I wrote the preface, the November elections produced Republican majorities in both houses of Congress. This bodes badly for welfare reauthorization and the prospects for low-income people generally. Even more important to me, Senator Paul Wellstone, his wife Sheila, their daughter, and five others died in a plane crash. This was a huge loss for America and for me personally because he and Sheila were my dear friends. The coming tough period for the progressive side will be made even tougher by the removal of such a strong voice for justice. We will miss Paul especially and enormously. Enormously.

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*Note to readers:* I know of two mistakes from the hardcover edition. The first is in talking about Robert Kennedy’s trip to California to meet Cesar Chavez in 1966. I say that the first day of the hearings was in Visalia and the second was in Delano. My dear friend Paul Schrade pointed out that the order of places was the reverse. Maybe it doesn’t matter much, but it’s important to Paul and it’s important to me, so I want to set the record straight.

The second is much more significant, and it is that when I discuss Robert Kennedy’s role in the development of the War on Poverty, I neglect to mention Sargent Shriver, who, of course, ran the War on Poverty after it was created. The omission occurred because I am talking about the period of time before the Economic Opportunity Act was enacted, during which Shriver was not involved. But, Sarge Shriver is a man whom I admire and respect. He was a great public servant and he cares passionately about issues of poverty. He deserves the gratitude of all of us for his contributions, and I should have acknowledged his leadership. I do so now. Eunice, this is for you, too. Thank you for pointing it out to me.