

The U.S. income gap — the distance between rich and poor — is bigger than it's been at any time since the Great Depression, a fact seized upon by many on the left as justification for more government, more income redistribution and more paeans to Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

In fact, many on the left suggest, it's time for America to open up another front.

President Obama has himself said that the "combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat

to the American Dream" and are the "defining challenge of our times."

"Why," he went on to ask during a speech at the Center for American Progress not long ago, "has Washington consistently failed to act?"

U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan, who stands as good a chance as anyone right now at taking over the Oval Office, has a different question.

Ryan in no way disagrees with the importance of these issues. He's spent considerable time over the last year visiting inner-city neighborhoods with civil rights



Paul Ryan sees entrenched poverty as a symptom of the American Dream slipping away

activist Robert L. Woodson Sr. and putting together a strategy for restoring the American Dream. That strategy will be featured in his forthcoming book, Where Do We Go From Here? (Grand Central Publishing), scheduled for August release.

In an interview with WPRI President Mike Nichols, the Wisconsin congressman was careful to parse the two frequently conflated terms: inequality and mobility. And he asked a very different question than the one President Obama does. "What are we going to do to remove the barriers to allow people to be where they want to be and do with their lives what they want to do?"

While the left can say, "Tve got a program to fix this problem in our communities. All I've got to do is fund it, raise taxes, spend money," the answer from the right "isn't so clean," says Ryan. "Our answer isn't so quick and easy. It isn't government's responsibility. It's our responsibility in our communities to do this, and we've got to get involved."

This conversation has been edited and abridged.

Mike Nichols: Do you think people have been confusing income disparity and upward mobility?

Paul Ryan: I do. The left has been focusing on income inequality for a couple of reasons. One, because they don't have an agenda for economic growth — they're actually exacerbating income inequality. Two, focusing on income inequality can justify ideology. The ideology is a progressive ideology that believes in equal outcomes versus equal opportunities.

'If you care about upward mobility, about prosperity, about freedom, you need to get involved and fight for a civil society.'

......

Nichols: Are they totally separate things?

......

Ryan: They're related topics. Focusing on income inequality comes from a false premise. It assumes that life and the economy is a zero-sum game. That the pie of life is fixed. That it's all a question of making sure that the slices are distributed more equally. That premise is just wrong. The goal should be growing the pie for everybody.

The focus on inequality leads to a call for redistribution and to penalizing success from both policy and cultural standpoints. What does that say about getting people up and on with their lives?

Income inequality is a real issue, but maybe not in the way the left likes to put it, which is, "We haven't redistributed enough." It's a real issue in that too many people have fallen further behind, and our policies are making it worse.

Nichols: Harvard economist Raj Chetty came out with this recent study that said, contrary to popular belief, the odds of moving up or down the income ladder really haven't changed that much in 20 years. A lot of people point out, too, that, hey, most adults today have higher incomes, even adjusted for inflation, than their parents did. A skeptic might say, why the focus now on upward mobility?

Ryan: Everybody's not hitting their potential. We've seen this 50-year War on Poverty, which put in these perverse incentives that trapped people in poverty. We need to come at it from a different perspective — to get people out of poverty by embracing upward mobility.

I talk about the poverty trap a lot. I just had a hearing on Obamacare and how it contributes to the poverty trap. We're making it harder for people to transition from welfare to work, from subsistence to independence.

Too many people are getting left behind. They're being isolated, and we can do better. As a moral society, it's our obligation to do better. Not just in government, but just as people in our communities. When we see our fellow citizens being isolated, falling through the cracks, missing their potential, we have an obligation to help fix that.

Nichols: Is it fair to say that the focus and

your concern is mostly on the poor?

Ryan: No, that's not fair to say.

Nichols: In Milwaukee, if you're born in the lowest quintile — the bottom 20% for

'I see poverty as less an issue of material deprivation and much more

......

as an issue of isolation.

......

income — you really only have about a 5% or 6% chance of ever reaching the top 20% in income. Chances are pretty good that more than a third of those folks born in the lowest quintile are going remain there.

Ryan: I don't look at it as a class thing. I just see it as opportunity and mobility up and down the scale. What can we do to remove the barriers to allow people to be where they want to be? To do with their life what they want and flourish?

As a conservative, that means government's response has got to be limited but effective, and society's response has got to be far more integrated and involved.

Nichols: Why do those barriers seem to be greater in some locations than others? If you look at Milwaukee, for instance, the numbers are pretty stark. They're worse than in most other large cities.

I know you've been spending some time, in a low-key way, in Milwaukee. Could you shed some light on why things have been so difficult here? What have you found talking to folks?

Ryan: That's exactly why I've been doing this. I haven't been bringing reporters with me. I'm on my own learning journey.

I've been spending more of my time in the severe poor areas, in Milwaukee and around the country. I've learned about these incredible cultural antibodies in our communities, even in the poorest of poor communities, that make a huge difference.

So you want to ask yourself, well gosh, what are they doing that works? What is the secret to their success? Because they're doing it against all these odds.

And what I learn is No. 1: People have been isolated. I see poverty as less an issue of material deprivation and much more as an issue of isolation.



I see that we have isolated the poor into enclaves away from the rest of society. Those neighborhoods have been hit with such a tough culture. Kids don't have two parents. Crime. Drugs. All of those things.

Social pathologies have destroyed these communities, and they've been quarantined

from the rest of society. They've been given plenty of government programs to mitigate the problems, but they haven't worked near to the extent that they need to.

So we've got to stop quarantining, and reintegrate. We've got to see the successful

'Too many people are getting left behind. They're being isolated. As a moral society, it's our obligation to do better.'

......

stories — violence-free zones at Pulaski High, at Rufus King; Victor Barnett at Running Rebels; Milwaukee Working, which is a really cool program.

We've got to see what they're doing, and not federalize it or institutionalize it. Just support it. That means open up this space for civil society, protect what they're doing, retell their story, and amplify their efforts.

That means with our dollars from private charity, yes. But also with our time and our talents. Milwaukee Working is a perfect example. You've got a well-to-do suburban church like Elmbrook Church, probably the biggest evangelical church in Wisconsin, working with inner-city residents to get people back to work, back to lives of self-sufficiency, embracing the healing power of redemption.

Elmbrook Church has got a lot of talented people, accountants and business leaders, who can really make a difference. They're bringing, yes, their money, but also their expertise. They're helping reintegrate and reconnect with people in poverty.

Nichols: The data show — and common sense says — that strong communities, social networks and, of course, education, create opportunity for folks on the lower rungs. It all makes sense. But how do we, completely outside of government, encourage community? Are you saying the government is getting in the way? Or are you simply calling on people's better angels to form communities and to look after their brothers?

Ryan: I'm saying both. You put your finger on the hardest thing to get your mind around: You can't pass a bill in Congress saying, "Fix these communities, and reintegrate the poor into society." That can only be done by people just doing it.

So I think we have to have a new discussion about how to do that. The bully pulpit can help. It's a recognition that has to occur. I do think the government, unintentionally, has frustrated this in two ways. One, the perverse incentives set up with the War on Poverty created a trap that made it more difficult for people to transition from poverty into work, into upper mobility. That's something I am working on as a policymaker, and it's important. But it's clearly not the only thing that needs to be done.

What the government also has done, I think, is unintentionally driven this impression that the government will fix poverty, that the government's got a program to help that person you're passing on the street

So if you're driving to a Bucks game or to a Brewers game, and you pass these blighted areas where you worry about your own

personal safety — you don't think to yourself, "Government's going to fix that. I don't have to get involved."

Nichols: What you're trying to do seems incredibly ambitious. You're trying to reverse this ingrained belief that the War on Poverty is a government responsibility rather than a responsibility that we all share.

Ryan: That's right. Not to wear my religion on my sleeve, but in Catholicism we call it subsidiarity. Which is why you have to tackle these problems locally. And, yes, if you cannot do it locally, then you kick it upstairs to the next level, and then to the next level. But you don't start at the top and wash your hands of responsibility.



That is the problem the government's response to poverty, unbeknownst and unintentionally, created.

Right now, the average taxpayer, who's stretching and working really hard, living in a suburb, when they drive by those blighted neighborhoods, they think: "It's not my responsibility. Government will take care of it. I have enough problems of my own. I've got to pay my taxes, pay my bills, save for college for

my kids."

Unfortunately, that just can't cut it anymore. Everybody's got to get involved. It's each of us, not government, each of us. The government needs to remove the barriers that make this harder.

For non-Catholics, I say subsidiarity is related to the principle of federalism.

......

'We've seen this 50-year War on Poverty, which put in these perverse incentives that trapped people in poverty.'

Nichols: I'm Catholic, and I understand that. You seem to speak increasingly, frankly, as a Catholic, and it's compelling.

......

Ryan: I try not to.

Nichols: But how do you speak to people who don't have a religious view of the world and encourage them to form communities? To step up in ways that are really based on nature rather than government, or on human decency rather than government?

Ryan: I know exactly what you mean. That's why I try to speak in the most ecumenical way I can. The way I describe it is: Look, if we don't fight to create the space for a civil society and work to revitalize civil society, then government's going to do it. That means government will take away more of our freedoms, more of our liberties and more of the fullness of living life. It won't work.

You can look around the world where these ideas have been tested, where they've crowded out civil society in the name of equality. People are miserable. Societies don't prosper. All the social pathologies that follow

'You can look around the world where they've crowded out civil society in the name of equality. People are miserable.

Societies don't prosper.'

in their wake end up basically reducing society to a low common denominator of misery, where nobody reaches their potential.

......

So if you care about upward mobility, about prosperity, about freedom, about a flourishing life where you can do what you want — you need to get involved and fight for a civil society and for community.

To me, this is full-spectrum conservatism, but more importantly full-spectrum classical liberalism. This is what we've done so well in America. It's what Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about when he wrote *Democracy in America*.

We have lost a lot of it because of ideology, because of philosophy, but also because of inertia and moral relativism and because of government's growth and displacement of these things. We've all just gotten too busy in our lives. We have so much more technology that integrates us, yet we've grown further apart.

Nichols: Are you trying to remind people about an old strain of conservatism that many people have forgotten?

Ryan: I don't know if I would call it an old strain of conservatism. It's a component of conservatism that is crucial to maintaining freedom, to keeping America free and prosperous for the 21st century.

The fact is, what the left can do is say, "I've got a program to fix this problem in our communities. All I've got to do is raise taxes, spend money." Our answer isn't so quick and easy, which is: "This isn't government's responsibility. It's our responsibility in our communities to fix this."

Nichols: People are going to say, though, that it's more the message of a preacher than a politician.



Ryan: I wouldn't say it that way. I'd say it's a civic message, not a preacher's message: We have to reintegrate our communities that have been quarantined off, and open this space for civil society.

Nichols: We've been involved in this War on Poverty for 50 years. How long is it going to take to change the poverty dynamic? To turn it around for young kids born into a third generation of government dependency?

Ryan: I just don't know the answer, but it's going to take a long time. If you read Bob Putnam or Charles Murray — a guy from the right and a guy from the left — you'll come away with real doubts. We have a lot of work cut out for us.

......

'We're trying to advance the notion of an on-ramp to get people already well into their lives — in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s — back into lives of self-sufficiency.'

......

What we're basically trying to advance here is the notion of an on-ramp to get people already well into their lives — in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s — back into society, back into lives of self-sufficiency. And then a new start for the youth where they're learning right from wrong, growing up in good environments. To change that culture, it's going to take everybody, not just government.

That to me is how America endures. Otherwise we'll just be another cradle-to-grave welfare state that ends with a debt crisis and a coarse culture. **Nichols:** Are you saying you're going to use your bully pulpit to get this message out and change the attitude and the culture?

Ryan: I think everybody needs to do this, yes. The more people who embrace these ideas, who embrace reintegrating and re-engaging civil society, the faster we are on the right path.



Devin Anderson queries Ryan about education at his Racine listening session.

Nichols: One other question. People wonder why Paul Ryan is concerned about this. Are you worried that the American Dream has just disappeared for too many kids? Is that putting it too bluntly?

Ryan: No, that's exactly right. That's what I'm mostly writing about in my book. I grew up in Janesville in a great community with a lot of support. You were taught the American idea, and you lived the American idea. But what we've seen too often in society, in too many places and at an alarming rate of increase: Too many people don't even know what that is anymore. They don't even believe it's there for them. That's the ending of the American experiment. That's what motivates me.