

amity shlaes the forgotten man

Amity Shlaes: *The Forgotten Man* is a compelling exploration of the Great Depression and its impact on American society, economy, and politics. Written by Amity Shlaes, a renowned economic historian and best-selling author, this book provides a critical analysis of the policies implemented during the 1930s under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Shlaes argues that many of the solutions proposed by the New Deal were not only ineffective but often exacerbated the economic malaise. Through her thorough research and engaging narrative, she brings to light the stories of individuals who suffered during this tumultuous period, emphasizing the often-overlooked consequences of government intervention.

Understanding the Core Thesis

Amity Shlaes presents a provocative thesis that challenges the conventional wisdom surrounding the Great Depression. She posits that the New Deal, rather than rescuing the American economy, prolonged the economic downturn. Her narrative focuses on the "forgotten man," an archetype representing the average American who faced the brunt of the economic crisis and government policies.

The Forgotten Man

The term "forgotten man" is derived from a speech by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, symbolizing the ordinary citizen who is often overlooked in political discourse. Shlaes identifies several key characteristics of the forgotten man:

1. Victim of Economic Policies: The forgotten man was often an unwitting victim of the New Deal policies, which were intended to help but frequently resulted in adverse outcomes.
2. Struggle for Survival: The forgotten man faced daily struggles to provide for his family, often working multiple jobs or relying on limited government assistance.
3. Loss of Agency: As government intervention increased, the forgotten man often lost his agency, becoming dependent on federal programs that were not always beneficial.

Shlaes uses personal stories, historical records, and economic data to paint a vivid picture of this demographic, showcasing how their lives were impacted by the decisions made in Washington.

The New Deal: A Double-Edged Sword

Shlaes provides a detailed account of the New Deal, outlining its various components and their intended goals. While many of these initiatives were designed to stimulate economic recovery, she argues that they often had the opposite effect.

Key Programs and Policies

Some of the most notable programs introduced during the New Deal include:

- Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC): Aimed at providing jobs for young men and improving public lands, the CCC employed over three million men. However, Shlaes argues that it also disrupted the labor market and created dependency on government jobs.
- Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA): This act sought to raise crop prices by limiting production. While it helped some farmers, it also led to food waste and increased prices, affecting the forgotten man who struggled to afford basic necessities.
- National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA): Intended to stimulate industrial growth and improve labor conditions, NIRA often resulted in monopolistic practices and reduced competition, which stifled economic recovery.
- Social Security Act: While providing a safety net for the elderly and unemployed, Shlaes contends that it also fostered a culture of dependency, undermining individual initiative and responsibility.

Criticism of The New Deal

Shlaes critiques several aspects of the New Deal, emphasizing the following points:

- Ineffectiveness: Many policies, instead of reviving the economy, created a prolonged recession, as businesses struggled to comply with regulations and labor laws.
- Impact on Small Businesses: The New Deal favored large corporations and unions, often sidelining small businesses that could not compete with the mandates imposed by the government.
- Political Consequences: The expansion of government power during this period set a precedent for future administrations to intervene in the economy, leading to a more significant governmental role in American life.

Personal Stories of the Forgotten Man

One of the most powerful aspects of Shlaes' work is her ability to humanize the economic data through personal stories. She shares narratives of individuals who exemplify the struggles faced by the forgotten man.

Case Studies

1. The Farmer: A struggling farmer who, despite his hard work, faced mounting debts due to fluctuating prices and government regulations. His story illustrates the paradox of the AAA—while intended to help, it often resulted in financial ruin for farmers who could not adapt.

2. **The Factory Worker:** A factory worker who lost his job due to unionization efforts supported by the NIRA. This story highlights the unintended consequences of policies that aimed to protect workers but ultimately led to job losses.

3. **The Small Business Owner:** A small business owner who found it increasingly difficult to compete in a market dominated by larger corporations benefitting from government contracts and regulations. This narrative underscores the challenges faced by those who relied on their entrepreneurial spirit.

The Legacy of The Forgotten Man

Amity Shlaes argues that the lessons from the Great Depression and the New Deal are still relevant today. The concept of the forgotten man serves as a reminder of the importance of individual responsibility and the potential pitfalls of government intervention.

Relevance to Modern Policy

1. **Government Intervention:** Shlaes' work raises critical questions about the role of government in economic recovery. She encourages a reevaluation of policies that prioritize government solutions over free-market principles.

2. **Welfare Dependency:** The stories of the forgotten man highlight the dangers of creating a welfare state that discourages self-sufficiency and incentivizes dependency.

3. **Individual Agency:** At its core, Shlaes advocates for the importance of individual agency and the belief that people should have the opportunity to shape their destinies without excessive governmental interference.

Conclusion

In *Amity Shlaes: The Forgotten Man*, the author skillfully intertwines historical analysis with personal narratives to shed light on the complexities of the Great Depression and the New Deal. By focusing on the forgotten man, Shlaes challenges readers to reconsider the impact of government policies and the importance of individual responsibility. Her work serves as a poignant reminder of the past and a cautionary tale for the future, urging society to learn from history to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Through her meticulous research and compelling storytelling, Shlaes not only brings to light the often-overlooked experiences of ordinary Americans but also opens a dialogue about the balance between government intervention and personal agency in shaping economic policy.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central thesis of Amity Shlaes' 'The Forgotten Man'?

Amity Shlaes argues that the New Deal policies of the 1930s, while well-intentioned, ultimately hindered economic recovery by imposing heavy regulations and creating dependency on government aid, thereby neglecting the 'forgotten man'—the ordinary American who bore the burden of these policies.

How does Shlaes use historical figures to support her argument?

Shlaes references key figures such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover to illustrate the contrasting approaches to economic recovery, highlighting how Roosevelt's New Deal often overlooked the impact on individual citizens and small businesses.

What role does Shlaes attribute to government intervention in the economy during the Great Depression?

Shlaes contends that government intervention, particularly through the New Deal, created a cycle of dependency and stifled entrepreneurial spirit, ultimately prolonging the economic downturn instead of facilitating recovery.

In what ways does 'The Forgotten Man' challenge the traditional narrative of the New Deal?

Shlaes challenges the traditional narrative by portraying the New Deal as a series of misguided policies that ignored the voices and needs of ordinary Americans, thus reframing the discussion around the consequences of government overreach.

What significance does the term 'forgotten man' hold in Shlaes' work?

The term 'forgotten man' refers to the average American who suffers from the consequences of governmental policies, highlighting the disconnect between political decisions and the lived experiences of citizens during the Great Depression.

How has 'The Forgotten Man' been received by critics and scholars?

Critics and scholars have had mixed reactions to 'The Forgotten Man'; some praise Shlaes for her thorough research and engaging narrative, while others argue that her interpretation downplays the necessity and benefits of New Deal programs in addressing the economic crisis.

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