





Reflections on the Moynihan Report

William J. Bennett

30 YEARS LATER

Pat Moynihan and I have differed on a number of issues over the years. We belong to different political parties. And I will confess I wish that the career of Senator Pat Moynihan, legislator, would have more closely resembled Professor Pat Moynihan, scholar.

Nevertheless, I consider Daniel Patrick Moynihan to be one of the seminal political figures of our time. He possesses a luminous intelligence and deep intellectual integrity. For three decades he has done more than any other contemporary political

• • •

LIBERAL INTELLECTUALS AND

CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

CRITICIZED THE MOYNIHAN

REPORT FOR FOCUSING TOO

MUCH ON ILLEGITIMACY, AND

FOR ITS DEFENSE OF "MIDDLE- CLASS" VALUES.

figure to advance the national conversation on important social issues. So it was with a good deal of enthusiasm that I agreed to Karl Zinsmeister's request to write about the contemporary social and political relevance of "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action"—the so-called Moynihan Report, one of the most important pieces of social science ever produced—which was released 30 years ago this March.

The Prescient Moynihan Report

After rereading the 78-page Moynihan Report, one of the things that immediately stands out is what a rare government document it is: lucid, readable, well argued, even eloquent in places. In an age in which public officials promise the moon and the stars, there is a becoming modesty to it:

"The object of this study has been to define a problem, rather than propose solutions to it.... In a word, a national effort towards the problems of Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure. The object should be to strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support its members as do other families. After that, how this group of Americans chooses to run its affairs, take advantage of its opportunities, or fail to do so, is none of the nation's business."

In the 30 years since its release, the Moynihan Report has been praised for its prescience and its political courage. Prescience because its central insight—family stability should be the basis of social legislation and central to the civil rights struggle—was so right, so early, and at the very time when the assault on the nuclear family was in its early stages. It was politically courageous because its author was willing to risk the kinds of harsh personal attacks that are often directed at those who address—even thoughtfully—topics deemed too controversial.

Because the Moynihan Report has at last been embraced by many on the Left and the Right, one can easily forget how

inflammatory it was in its day. The topic of the deteriorating condition of the black family was so sensitive that, according to reporters Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, attempts were actually made to suppress release of the study. Once it did become public, it was bitterly attacked by some for encouraging "subtle racism."

Liberal intellectuals and civil rights activists criticized the Moynihan Report for focusing too much on illegitimacy, and for its defense of "middle-class" values. "What may seem to be a disease to the white middle class may be a healthy adaptation to the Negro lower class," asserted Bayard Rustin. "My major criticism of the report is that it assumes that middle-class American values are the correct ones for everyone in America," wrote Floyd McKissick, director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). "Just because Moynihan believes in the middle-class values doesn't mean that they are the best for everyone in America," he argued. Professors Lee Rainwater and William Yancey suggested that "in the public version of the report, it would have been well to reduce the discussion of illegitimacy because of the inflammatory nature of the issue with its inevitable overtones of immorality."

The good news is that most people have now come around to Moynihan's view of the world. We are all Moynihanians now, if you will. Overwhelming empirical evidence demonstrates that shattered families are today's primary threat to the civic order, and the principal cause of contemporary poverty. According to the Census Bureau, the family income of black two-parent families is almost two-and-a-half times the family income of

white single-parent families, and children of white single-parents are two-and-a-half times likelier to be living in poverty than children in black two-parent families. Today's major domestic problem, clearly, is family solidarity, not race.

"Tangle of Pathologies"

Past and Present

The Moynihan Report places our current social situation in historical context, and clearly reveals two things: One is that the nation has taken a ruinous social slide over the last three decades. The other is that we have become in many ways inured to the trauma.

In 1965, one-quarter of all black children were born out of wedlock. A little more than one-half of all black children lived in broken homes at some time before they reached age 18. Nearly a quarter of all black women who had married were living apart from their husband. Fourteen percent of black children were on welfare.

Faced with this "tangle of pathologies," Moynihan wrote: "There is a considerable body of evidence to support the conclusion that Negro social structure, in particular the Negro family... is in the deepest trouble.... [The breakup of the black family] is the single most important social fact of the United States today.... At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of weakness of the Negro community at the present time.... The family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown." When the Moynihan Report was finally made public, *Newsweek* magazine referred to its "stunning numbers." The *New York Times* editorialized that "whatever the index of social pathology... it is apparent that the Negro family in the urban areas of this country is rapidly decaying." William Ryan of Harvard (one of Moynihan's most prominent critics) warned of "frightening statistics about broken Negro families, illegitimate Negro children, and Negro welfare recipients." Martin Luther King, Jr., categorized the existing breakdown of the Negro family as a "social catastrophe."

William J. Bennett is the John M. Olin Distinguished Fellow in Cultural Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation and co-director of Empower America.

IN 1991, 68 PERCENT OF ALL

BLACK BIRTHS WERE OUT OF
WEDLOCK. MORE THAN 70
PERCENT OF BLACK CHILDREN
WILL HAVE BEEN SUPPORTED
BY AFDC PAYMENTS AT ONE
POINT OR ANOTHER DURING
CHILDHOOD.

apart—the social fabric. But one result that has received little attention is the fact that accumulating decay has undermined popular faith in government and reminded us of its limits.

The public's deep antipathy toward government is one of the most important political facts of this decade. The near-total collapse of public confidence in political institutions is attributable to many things—the extraordinary increase in size and intrusiveness of government, the arrogance of the political class, toxic campaigns, the superficial coverage and cynical attitude of some media, banal rhetoric, habitual overpromising, corrupt public officials, and the passage of a lot of very bad legislation. But I believe there is something else going on as well: The soaring expectations of the federal government circa 1960s have collided with the social and political realities of the 1990s.

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s, the public developed boundless confidence in, and extraordinarily high expectations of, the federal government. Whether it was the launching of the New Deal or the Great Society, building a national highway system, or winning a world war, helping to develop penicillin or putting a man on the moon, it seemed there was no problem the federal government could not solve, or at least ameliorate.

This intoxicated sense of what government could achieve had no basis in any previous historical experience. Nevertheless, it fostered a certain mindset. The political class and the public began to look reflexively to federal programs to solve national problems. In *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*,

Pat Moynihan recounted a conversation he had in the summer of 1965 with a top presidential aide:

"I was terribly conscious of the enormous obstacles in the way of any attempt by government to stimulate authentic social action within a community. I was also terribly aware of what seemed to me then—and still seems—the serious failures of many of the governmental programs that had already been established. I was trying to suggest that we might come closer to a solution of the problem if the government tried to do a few things well instead of doing a great many things badly. He was extremely impatient with any discussion of complexity.... He just was not interested in anything that did not lead directly to a specific proposal which he could place before the President—and before the Congress."

The issue of race is illustrative. In a little over a decade, we witnessed the de jure end of segregation (1954), passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964), and passage of the Voting Rights Act (1965). These were monumental achievements. But there was still, in President Johnson's words, "the next and more profound stage" of the civil rights struggle to be won. Contemporary liberalism's strategy was to rev up the engine of government through new federal programs, huge increases in spending, court-ordered forced busing, and national quotas and set-asides.

At the heart of the liberal agenda was the idea that social justice would be achieved through government or judicial activism. John Gardner, Lyndon Johnson's secretary of health, education, and welfare and one of the influential liberals of the time, put it this way: "There are some people who have what I think of as a vending machine concept of social change. You put in a coin and out comes a piece of candy. If you have a social problem, you pass a law and out comes the solution."

We have put a lot of coins into the social vending machine during the last 30 years—and things have gotten a lot worse. If our travails were subject to monetary and programmatic solutions, we would already have dispatched most of them. After all, since 1965 we have spent more than \$5 trillion on hundreds of welfare programs. Can anyone claim we

That was then. This is now.

In 1991, 68 percent of all black births were out-of-wedlock. Only 6 percent of black children born in 1980 will live with both parents through age 18, according to some projections. And more than 70 percent of black children will have been supported by AFDC payments at one point or another during childhood. (In recent testimony at a Senate Finance Committee hearing chaired by Senator Moynihan, the same Professor Rainwater who in 1965 warned against discussing illegitimacy predicted that by the end of the century out-of-wedlock birthrates for minorities will be 80 percent, while the out-of-wedlock birthrate for Americans as a whole will be 40 percent.)

The Moynihan Report had little to say about the white family save that "the white family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability." Alas, that stability has now dissolved. During the intervening 30 years, white family structure has been severely eroded by high rates of illegitimacy, divorce, desertion, and welfare dependence. White illegitimacy, for instance, has increased from 4 percent in 1965 to 22 percent in 1991. The proportion of white females who are divorced has tripled. If these trends continue they will have even more serious consequences for American society than the decline of the black family, since whites constitute a much larger segment of the U.S. population.

This rapid, massive collapse of U.S. family structure is without precedent among civilized nations. Our country cannot sustain it; no country can. The American public in general—and the black community in particular—would surely give its collective eye teeth to wake up one morning and again face the "frightening statistics" of 1965. The question arises: What words can adequately describe the situation we are now in? If "social catastrophe" described the situation three decades ago, what words can possibly describe our much worse calamity now?

Social Pathologies and the Collapse of Faith in Government

Much has been written about how contemporary families' pathologies have frayed—and, in some urban areas, ripped

have gotten \$5 trillion worth of positive results? Can anyone pretend we have made our overall social life better? Can anyone deny the deleterious consequences that have resulted from many of these government payments?

The Great Society produced some successes and much failure. But the crisis of modern liberalism comes from the realization that its remedies have reached the limits of their effectiveness. As author Jonathan Rauch puts it, "Our problems have changed—in ways that defeat the postwar toolbox of public policies, much as viruses mutate to resist vaccines."

Even true believers in government redistribution as a cure for social ills must face the reality that the 1990s are not the 1960s or the 1930s. The most serious problems afflicting our society today are manifestly moral, behavioral, and spiritual, and therefore remarkably resistant to government cures. Defeating communism required resolute action from heads of government; overcoming the great challenges of our present age will require resolute actions from millions of individual citizens.

This is not meant to discount the importance of public policies; it is merely an attempt to put them in their proper perspective. Intelligent, carefully crafted legislation can affect things at the margin. Laws can encourage and discourage certain types of behavior. But government cannot force a man to be a good father to the child he sired, or make individuals take their professions of religious faith seriously, or cause the popular culture to become less vulgar. And these things matter much more to the success of future generations than do any actions of government.

Where We Go from Here

A seismic shift has recently taken place in our public discourse. A set of issues once thought beyond the purview of politics—the social issues, the moral issues, the family issues—is now suddenly driving the public debate. There is a widespread sense in our country that the wheels of our society have been coming off. The rising body counts, the daily atrocity stories, the mounting social science evidence, the horrifying signs of urban decay all around us have seared an impression upon the public imagination. The common citizenry

EVEN TRUE BELIEVERS IN GOVERNMENT REDISTRIBUTION AS A CURE FOR SOCIAL ILLS MUST FACE THE REALITY THAT THE 1990S ARE NOT THE 1960S.

knows that great chunks of America are in the midst of serious moral decline.

The good news is that indifference and denial have been replaced by an awakened recognition. But awakened recognition is merely the first step toward healing, and at present ours is still the recognition of the addict. In the latest national data, released in October of 1994, the U.S. illegitimacy rate climbed yet again—to 30 percent of all births. Meanwhile, our divorce rate remains the world's highest, continuing at more than twice its 1960 level. Only when these sorts of vital indicators head back toward healthier pre-1960s levels will we know that the national wishfulness for a better social life is actually leading to more wholesome habits.

In happy fact, we are beginning to see encouraging signs in the land. There are exciting rejuvenation movements like Promise Keepers, the National Fatherhood Initiative, and Best Friends. There is fresh interest in moral education, and a new intensity of child nurture in some quarters (as indicated by things like the boom in homeschooling). Some would say there is a spiritual ferment in the air. And of course there is the stunning evidence of the 1994 elections—where an almost monolithic set of returns indicated the rise of a broader, more nearly single-minded moral consensus than any other election of recent lifetimes.

Politics is of course an important arena, and one measure of our seriousness will be whether we make moral commonsense the touchstone of our social legislation in the future. The crucial test will be our willingness to translate our generalized concerns into a specific set of concrete initiatives. Will the federal government stop subsidizing illegitimacy through welfare payments? Will we pass tax policies that support rather than undermine the nuclear family? Are we will-

ing to rescind "no-fault" divorce laws? These are but a few of the tough reforms we need to come to terms with, always remembering that improvement will require disciplining ourselves, and not just modifying our neighbors' behavior.

The arena in which our cultural struggle will ultimately be won or lost is within the human heart. "For most of the things that properly can be called evils in the present," wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes, "I think the main remedy... is for us to grow more civilized." And so it is. As we approach the end of the last decade of this century, it is worth restating an obvious but often overlooked truth: Social regeneration depends on individual citizens living better, more honorable, more devoted lives. Not perfect lives, mind you. Just lives that reflect the basic and modest character traits—self-discipline, civic-mindedness, honesty, responsibility, and perseverance—that the Founding Fathers understood to be the sheet anchor of a free republic.

There are things that both liberals and conservatives can do to help advance the debate. Liberals can reject the illusion that we are but one more fully funded government program away from turning things around, can stop insisting that no progress can be made until we deal with economic "root causes" of behavioral decay, and stop ridiculing the religious and moral beliefs of conservative Christians.

Conservatives can resist the impulse to pander. It is wrong to say, in effect, that all is well with the American people—and that whatever is not well with them is somebody else's (usually a liberal's) fault. Contemporary liberalism does have a lot to answer for. But the argument that bad programs and bad behavior have been foisted upon a victimized and helpless public is not in keeping with conservatism's best tradition.

Previous civilizations have been overthrown from without; our present dissolution has been from within, which means it is entirely within our capacity to save ourselves. But the hour is growing late, very late. Many have heard the chimes at midnight. It's time we set to work.



SOX Families, Race, Poverty, Welfare

By nearly any measure, Patrick Moynihan's warning about the black family was right. Unfortunately, our response was to kill the messenger. We accepted the counsel of "experts" such as Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at John Hopkins University, who argued that it had yet to be shown that the "absence of a father was directly responsible for any of the supposed deficiencies of broken homes" and that the real issue "is not the lack of male presence but the lack of male income." National policy supporting the vision that fathers can be replaced by a monthly welfare check played a significant role in the erosion of the black family.

Today's rate of illegitimacy and single-parent households is unprecedented in black history. During periods of slavery, Jim Crowism, and codified racial discrimination, more black children lived in two-parent families than do today. That observation should give pause to "experts" who advance the argument that today's social pathology is a result of racism and poverty. If that is the case, how can they explain why many unwed black families (often 80 percent and higher) were two-parent at a time when there was much more racism, poverty, and fewer opportunities? The unambiguous bottom line is that the welfare state has done to the black family what slavery, Jim Crowism, and the rankest racism could never have done.

Walter E. Williams is John M. Olin Distinguished Professor of Economics, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

The Moynihan report is one of those rare documents that becomes more topical with each passing year. Its central insight—that widespread family disintegration represents a new source of social and economic inequality—is even more compelling today than it was in 1965. Even its language seems fresh: fatherless families, broken homes, illegitimacy, and (famously) a "tangle of pathologies."

Although there is much to admire in the report's contemporaneity, there is little to cheer. That the crisis of the family would become so deep and widespread in so short a period of time was nearly unthinkable in the 1960s. Few realized how profoundly the sex and divorce revolution, then only gathering steam, would change the way Americans think about and organize their most important family relationships and commitments. As a result, in the 1990s the problem of family structure transcends both race and class. It has become a problem of all American families.

Yet the problem cannot be captured simply by calculating the growing number

A Symposium Revisiting the Moynihan Report at Its Thirtieth Anniversary

of broken families. There is a cultural as well as a demographic dimension to family breakup. Culturally, marriage is declining as the foundation for childrearing and long-term parental investment in children. Once joined together, marriage and parenthood are splitting apart. Teenagers have grasped this idea as quickly as they have latched on to other culturally significant ideas. In some places in America, teenagers routinely flock to their friends' baby showers (and funerals), but never to a wedding. Writing of unwed teen parents in the fall issue of *City Journal*, Kay Hymowitz observes, "Marriage, as far as these kids are concerned, is gone, dead, an unword."

A rapidly entrenching culture of divorce and nonmarriage makes the problem of disintegrating families more intractable, less treatable with

conventional policy measures. But clearly there is growing consensus on some essential first steps: welfare reform, a campaign to reduce unwed teen parenthood, an effort to create jobs with decent pay and benefits. However, the policy consensus falters on one issue: divorce. There are political risks in an effort to bring down the historically high levels of divorce, since both the American middle class and opinion elites are implicated in and ambivalent about divorce trends. Yet along with the growing inequality of earnings, divorce is the great generator of diverging economic futures for middle-class families and their children. The problem will not go away if divorce holds steady. It will take the same kind of courage and prophetic insight exemplified by the Moynihan report to make the case for national action against divorce.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead is writing a book on marriage.

Joe Rainwater

Rereading the Moynihan report, I am struck by how useful the story it tells is for understanding American poverty, and minority poverty in particular, in the 1990s. The numbers have changed—gotten much worse—but the forces that reproduce poverty are much the same.

There is also depression that after 30 years the policy process Moynihan proposed has made so little headway. A mythical Moynihan report is sometimes used to justify lurid fantasies about where our society is going, and to give a patina of scientific justification for policy proposals so harsh that they would get