

The Tory From New York

Miles to Go: A Personal History of Social Policy

Daniel Patrick Moynihan
Harvard University Press
245 pages / \$22.95

REVIEWED BY
David Frum

Don't get your hopes up: despite its subtitle, this is not Daniel Patrick Moynihan's autobiography. Instead, it is a collection of the intellectual senator's most interesting recent writings and speeches, elegantly knitted together with personal observations, anecdotes, and quips. The essays in this delightful book, which includes the brilliant "Defining Deviancy Down," are lucid and wise; the anecdotes sparkle—and, incidentally, betray Moynihan's exceedingly low opinion of the Clintons and their administration. And yet it's also a disturbing book, for it reminds us how vast a gap has opened up between Moynihan the thinker and Moynihan the politician, between the man's words and his actions. The gap has widened so far that not even the nimble Moynihan can straddle it for very much longer; suggesting, I think, that the anticipated autobiography, should it ever appear, will prove evasive and disappointing.

Moynihan the thinker has tried for thirty years to warn of the crisis in black urban America; he repeats that caution again here. Yet even as this book was going to press, Moynihan the politician was passionately resisting welfare reform—not just Gingrich welfare reform, but *any* welfare reform. The thinker has stressed the crucial importance of family stability to national welfare; the politician cast one of

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the fourteen senatorial votes against the Defense of Marriage Act. The thinker cast a skeptical eye on the mushrooming of entitlement spending; but Moynihan the politician, when given the opportunity in 1983 to salvage Social Security, could devise no better reform than a big hike in payroll taxes.

Though called a neoconservative by critics to his left, and an old-fashioned liberal by those to his right, it would be more accurate to call Moynihan a Tory. Like the old Tories, he is not easily impressed by projects of social reform. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society did not dazzle him, and neither did the Clintons' Glorious Health Care Revolution. Doubts about the Clintons fill the book with some of its most scathing passages, notably these words from a June 1994 letter to Laura Tyson, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers:

In the last six months I have been repeatedly impressed by the number of members of the Clinton administration who have assured me with great vigor that something or other is known in an area of social policy which, to the best of my understanding, is not known at all. This seems to me perilous. It is quite possible to live with uncertainty, with the possibility, even the likelihood that one is wrong. But beware of certainty where none exists. Ideological certainty easily degenerates into an insistence upon ignorance.

The great strength of political conservatives at this time (and for a generation) is that they are open to the thought that matters are complex. Liberals have got into a reflective pattern of denying this. I had hoped twelve years in the wilderness might have changed this; it may be it has only reinforced it. If this is so, the current revival of liberalism will be brief and inconsequential.

At its best, Toryism teaches us the limits of public policy—and that's the Tory-

ism of Moynihan the thinker. At its worst, Toryism sinks into a cynical defense of political evils, because (it believes) the alternative can only be worse. That, sad to say, is often the Toryism of Moynihan the politician.

In fairness, Moynihan comes by his Toryism honestly. Has anybody ever witnessed so many public-policy disasters from such a good seat? Moynihan was an officer in the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, the War on Crime, the War on Cancer, and the Moral Equivalent of the War on Energy—a series of debacles beside which the military history of Italy begins to look impressive. He recalls this anecdote from his work in the Nixon White House to shut down the "French connection," the flow of heroin from Turkey to the United States through Marseilles:

I found myself in a helicopter flying up to Camp David to report on this seeming success. The only other passenger was George P. Shultz, who was busy with official-looking papers. Even so, I related our triumph. He looked up. "Good," said he, and returned to his tables and charts. "No really," said I, "this is a *big* event." My cabinet colleague looked up once more, restated his perfunctory "Good," and once more returned to his paperwork. Crestfallen, I pondered, then said, "I suppose you think that so long as there is demand, there will continue to be a supply." Shultz, sometime professor of economics at the University of Chicago, looked up with an air of genuine interest. "You know," he said, "there's hope for you yet!"

No wonder, then, that Moynihan went AWOL when the Clintons tried to conscript him for the Great Battle For Affordable Health Insurance For Every American That Can Never Be Taken Away. Mrs. Clinton's crusade flunked every test of Tory good sense: a small group of politi-

cians in a hurry had designed a vast, comprehensive plan to demolish and reconstruct one-seventh of the American economy in the absence of any real demand by American society and any semblance of consent from those directly affected. Moynihan sensibly asked what the hurry was: "Four-fifths and more of the population had health care insurance. Biomedical research and the like were roaring ahead. Yet all this was presented in a rhetoric of crisis, deprivation, suffering. The language of protest."

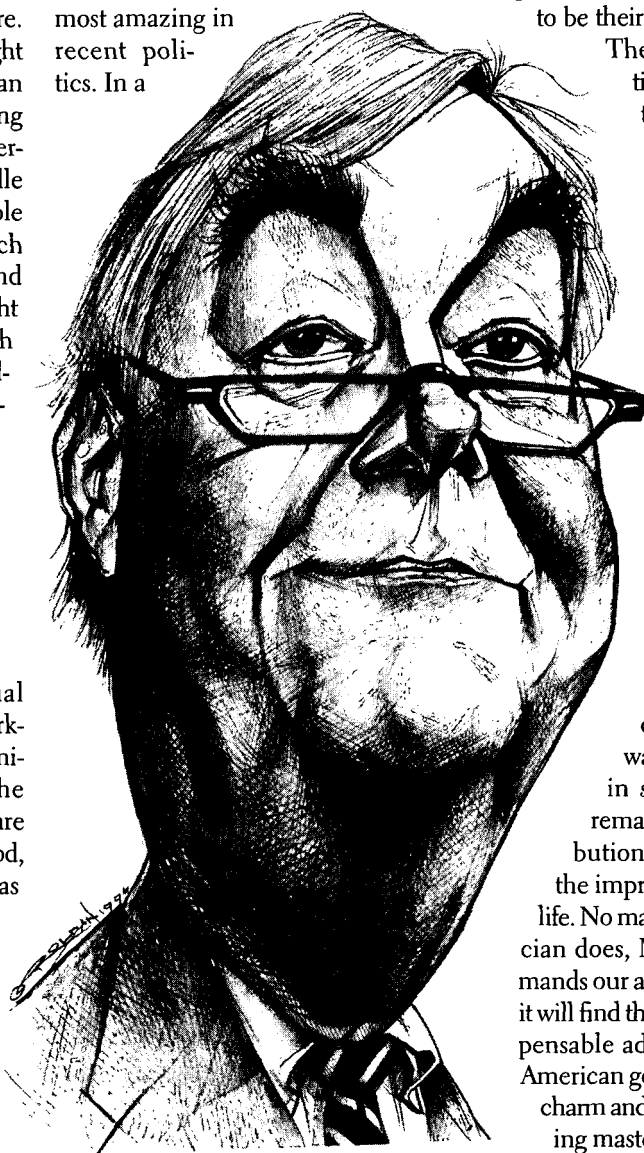
The senator did no small service to the state by helping to scupper the Clinton plan. But the dark side of his Toryism showed itself in his equal unwillingness to work with the Clinton administration and the new Republican congressional majority to reform welfare. There is a welfare crisis; nobody has taught us that more insistently than Moynihan himself. Millions of Americans are being drawn into destructive ways of life; American cities are crumbling as their middle classes seek to move as far away as possible from the violence and disorder for which the underclass is responsible; state and local budgets are sagging under the weight of aiding the ever more helpless poor with ever-greater spending—not just cash welfare, but disability benefits, special education, job training, housing programs, Medicaid, drug treatment, prisons, child services, and on and on.

Everyone agrees that something must be done, but nobody quite knows what that something should be. The two important previous attempts to overhaul the welfare system—Nixon's guaranteed annual income, Reagan's tentative 1988 workfare plan—abjectly failed. And Moynihan? With characteristic Tory wit, he prophesied that this new round of welfare reform would fail as well. David Ellwood, the Kennedy School professor who was Clinton's first adviser on welfare, stopped by Moynihan's office to pay his respects on his arrival in Washington. According to Ellwood, Moynihan wished him well—and told him he was looking forward, in two or three years, to reading

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Ellwood's book on why welfare reform had failed this time.

Moynihan's turnabout on welfare reform is one of the most amazing in recent politics. In a



memorable speech not included here, the senator rocked liberal New York by suggesting that welfare was bringing about a "speciation" of poor blacks, meaning that they had departed so far from American norms as to have almost nothing in common with the rest of the society. Then, in the most recent welfare debate, he took on the astonishing role of unblushing defender of the status quo.

His speech attacking the Republican welfare reform plan is gathered in these pages, and it is a great speech—one of the greatest to be delivered on the Senate floor in perhaps decades. Who would dare to tell Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose forebodings have almost always been justified in the past, that this time his warnings of catastrophes to come are wrong? But the people of New York did not elect Moynihan to be their chief political diagnostician.

They elected him to draft solutions, even imperfect solutions, to their problems. And with his immense prestige on this issue—a prestige that may even be greater with Republicans than in his own party—he could have been the principal drafter had he so chosen. Instead, he lapsed into a Toryism of the most extreme sort: an adamant insistence that the welfare problem cannot be solved or palliated, and can only be aggravated.

Happily, this book reveals the senator in other moods. Moynihan's role in the welfare debate was a disappointment: perhaps even a greater disappointment to him than it was to his admirers. But his role in *starting* the welfare debate remains one of the largest contributions any one man has made to the improvement of American public life. No matter what Moynihan the politician does, Moynihan the thinker commands our attention. Everyone who reads it will find this fascinating volume an indispensable addition to their education in American government, propounded with charm and wit by the subject's greatest living master. ❧

ISRAEL ROLDAN

U.S.A. Today: Dos Passos Reconsidered

John Dos Passos: U.S.A.

Edited by Townsend Ludington, Jr.
and Daniel Aaron

Library of America / 1,288 pages / \$40

REVIEWED BY
Thomas Mallon

"**D**os' 1919 is knocking people cold," Dawn Powell admitted to her diary, with a touch of envy, in March of 1932. The reception of the second novel in his U.S.A. trilogy made it clear that John Dos Passos (1896-1970) was "no longer a promising writer but as arrived as he can ever be—like Lewis or Dreiser..." By now he's barely on the syllabus, let alone in anyone's actual fund of reading, but with the issuance of *U.S.A.* in a single massive volume, the Library of America treats Dos Passos to the literary equivalent of video release, letting him join those other two long-since-departed arrivals in a *Pléiade* that now runs to nearly a hundred titles.

Never much skilled at the creation of characters (try to name one), Dos Passos preferred to concentrate on the churning panorama of America between McKinley and Hoover. But a return to *U.S.A.* reminds one that the main portions of all three novels (*The 42nd Parallel*, 1919, *The Big Money*) are headed with the names of a dozen recurring figures whose individual fortunes carry the narrative and paint the big picture, and one can only begin making sense of this triple-decker with a partial survey of its principal players.

Fainy "Mac" McCreary and Joe Williams are the working-class heroes, the first an itinerant printer, book salesman, "pearl diver" (dish washer), Wobly sympathizer and, finally, bystander

to Zapata's rebellion in Mexico. "I wanta study an' work for things," Mac tells his freight-hopping friend Ike Hall; "you know what I mean, not to get to be a goddam slavedriver but for socialism and the revolution an' like that..." The less enlightened Joe, a big galoot of a merchant mariner, exists mostly to be knocked around by the capitalist system. Prey to shipwreck, false arrest, unemployment and v.d., he is a sort of walking folk song, a brawler whose literary cousins fill the novels of London and Farrell.

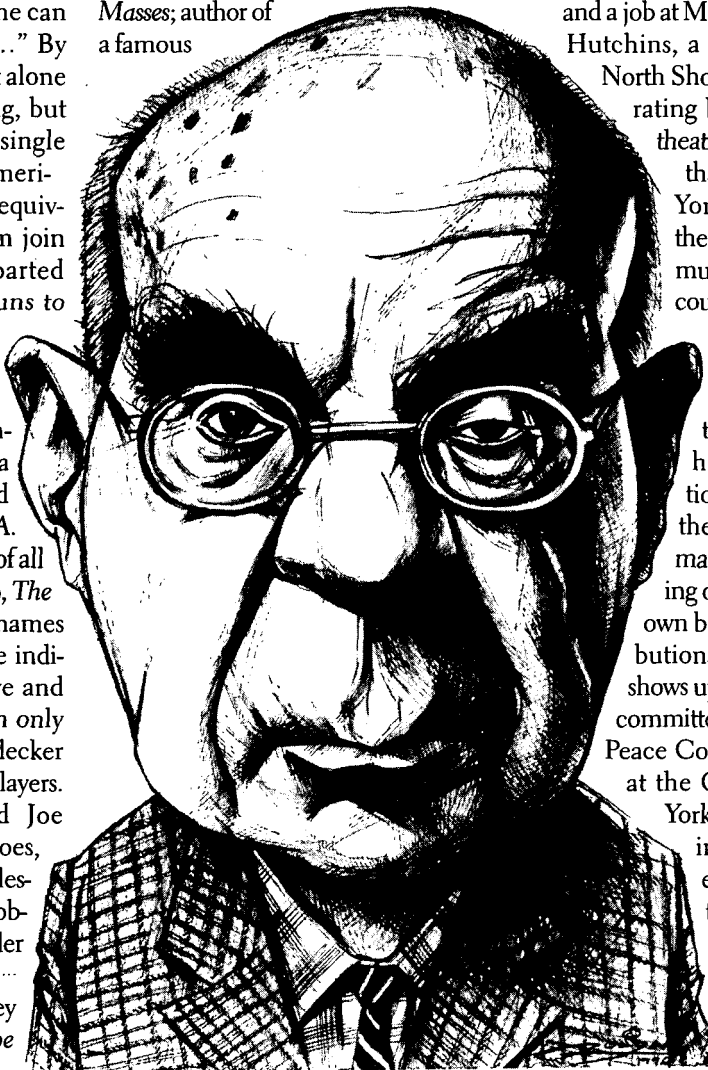
In the years leading up to *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos' left-wing credentials were well in order (on the board of *New Masses*; author of a famous

pamphlet in defense of Sacco and Vanzetti), but the America he chronicled was never the one despised by latter-day radicals. It was rough but redeemable (by socialism), and it left even a critical observer more awestruck than sour. (Just contrast Dos Passos's nation of immigrants with the one grotesquely imagined in E. Annie Proulx's new novel, *Accordion Crimes*, where America is less a WPA mural than a Hieronymous Bosch painting.) In *U.S.A.* even a put-upon radical like Ben Compton probably means it when he says, "It's a great life if you don't weaken."

Dos Passos's "depiction of women," as the academic matriarchy likes to phrase it, is distinctly on the harsh side: there are far more money-mad grasps than idealists here. Eleanor Stoddard is a Chicago stockyard-worker's daughter who will lie to herself and anyone else as she claws upward through art classes, a lace shop and a job at Marshall Field's. With Eveline Hutchins, a well-born dilettante from

North Shore Drive, she opens a decorating business and then designs theatrical costumes, an enterprise that soon takes them to New York. It's hard to read about these two without thinking how much more Scott Fitzgerald could have done with them, but

Dos Passos does manage something essential by making Eleanor the mistress of J. Ward Moorehouse, his on-the-make public-relations pioneer. Moorehouse is the novel's perpetual-motion machine, manufacturing nothing out of nothing. Believing his own bromides about P.R.'s contributions to "industrial peace," he shows up at the Mexican revolution; committees in Washington; the Paris Peace Conference; or just his office at the Graybar Building in New York, where he looks at the ceiling, "his big jowly face as expressionless as a cow's," thinking how much more attractive patent medicines would be if they were renamed something else. His faithful secretary is Janey Williams—Joe's sis-



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