Daniel Patrick Moynihan's America: The Legacies of a Professor–Politician

Introduction

Patrick Andelic, *Queen Mary University*
Louisa Hotson, *University of Oxford*
Daniel Rowe, *University of Oxford*

Daniel Patrick Moynihan was, according to Steven F. Hayward, "the Forrest Gump of American politics … on the scene, if not right in the middle, of most of the prominent controversies in America from 1964 until his retirement from the Senate in 2000." (Hayward 2001, xxxiv) He was a pledged delegate for John F. Kennedy at the 1960 Democratic convention and went on to serve as assistant secretary of labor in Kennedy's administration. Kept on in the Labor Department after Kennedy's assassination, Moynihan ran into public controversy when an internal report he had drafted, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (also known as the 'Moynihan Report'), leaked and drew accusations of racism and victim-blaming. He was a key influence on Lyndon Johnson's 1965 commencement address at Howard University, possibly the boldest commitment to African-American civil rights ever made by any president. He served as an adviser to President Nixon, overseeing the doomed Family Assistance Plan that would have created a guaranteed income for all Americans. He was US ambassador to India at the time of the 'Rupee Deal' in 1974, writing a cheque for $2.1 billion to the Indian government (still the largest cheque every written) and was ambassador to the United Nations at the time of the infamous resolution that declared Zionism to be a form of racism. As senator from New York, an office he occupied from 1977–2001, he helped frustrate Reagan's effort to reform Social Security in the 1980s and failed to halt Bill Clinton's reform of welfare in 1990s. When he retired from the Senate in 2001 he was succeeded by Hillary Clinton (Schoen 1979; Hodgson 2000; Katzmann 1998).

As well as this Gump-like habit of finding himself in the thick of the action, Moynihan was one of the few figures in American history to whom the label "polymath" can justly be applied. He was, at various times, a shoeshine boy, longshoreman, bartender, sociologist, political scientist, ethnographer, ambassador, Harvard professor, city planner, and politician. Michael Barone described him as "the nation's best thinker among politicians since Lincoln and its best politician among thinkers since Jefferson" (Barone and Ujifusa 1999, 1090). Moynihan thus stands as a fascinating figure in his own right as well as a useful prism through which to understand many developments of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

It was for these reasons that in April 2016 the authors organized, at the Rothermere American Institute, University of Oxford, a conference for graduates and early career scholars that considered Moynihan's life and legacy and the developments in the American nation that occupied his public career (c.1950–2000). This conference drew contributors from across the UK, Europe, and the United States and considered a range of political, social, and cultural issues and themes. The articles in this symposium are based on papers that were presented by scholars at this conference. We hope that by sharing a selection of the many excellent papers that were presented we can offer new perspectives on the US in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as add greater texture to the existing scholarship on Moynihan as a historical figure.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON MOYNIHAN

Part of the rationale for this conference was the revival of interest in Pat Moynihan in recent years. Since his death in 2003, Moynihan has become an increasingly attractive subject for historians and political scientists, not least because his enormous archive at the Library of Congress (at over one million items, the largest that the library holds on a single individual) is a remarkably fertile resource for scholars. Steven R. Weisman, working with a team of researchers, has pored through that archive to assemble a collection of Moynihan's letters, which were published in 2010 (Weisman 2010). Two years later,

doi:10.1017/S104909651600281X
© American Political Science Association, 2017

https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651600281X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gil Troy wrote a pugnacious retelling of Moynihan's tenure as ambassador to the United Nations, focusing on his leading role in opposing Resolution 3379, which declared Zionism to be "a form of racism and racial discrimination" (Troy 2012). In 2014, Brookings Institution fellow Stephen Hess produced a short, lively account of Moynihan's tenure in the Nixon White House, *The Professor and the President* (Hess 2015). And in 2015, Greg Weiner wrote an intellectual biography, *American Burke*, which presented Moynihan as an important exemplar of an ideological tradition that, recalling eighteenth-century British conservative Edmund Burke, both accepted government as a vital tool and displayed skepticism about its limitations (Weiner 2015a). In his contribution to this symposium, Godfrey Hodgson makes a similar point about Moynihan's distinctive kind of liberalism which, he says, combined an "enduring faith in democratic government' and 'a pessimism … about human affairs."

As well as this Gump-like habit of finding himself in the thick of the action, Moynihan was one of the few figures in American history to whom the label "polymath" can justly be applied. He was, at various times, a shoeshine boy, longshoreman, bartender, sociologist, political scientist, ethnographer, ambassador, Harvard professor, city planner, and politician.

The fact that 2015 was the fiftieth anniversary of the controversy surrounding the Moynihan Report, a document written by Moynihan when he was in the Department of Labor, helped to fuel this revival. Daniel Geary made the report, and its legacy, the focus of his book *Beyond Civil Rights*, arguing that the report embodied contradictory liberal and conservative impulses and that those ambiguities have allowed the report to be appropriated by a variety of political actors for their own purposes (Geary 2015). The Moynihan Report also gained more public and media attention as a key part of Ta-Nehisi Coates' remarkable cover story for *The Atlantic*, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration." Like Geary, Coates suggested that the ambiguities of the report (he described its author as a "conservative radical") were at least indirectly responsible for the rise of the carceral state since the 1960s which has become, he argues, the principal "social-service program" for black Americans (Coates 2015). Coates' deeply-researched and provocative article drew a number of responses from those who felt that his characterization of Moynihan had been unfair (Weiner 2015b; Troy 2015). Clearly, therefore, the debate over Moynihan and his legacy remains vital, and further work is on the way. Most notably, Peter-Christian Aigner, from City University of New York, is currently writing a biography for Simon and Schuster.

This symposium draws together studies of Moynihan's personal and public life, from his boyhood through to his career in the Senate. It opens with an essay from Godfrey Hodgson, a biographer and close friend of Moynihan's, which explores Moynihan's early life and combines personal reminiscences with reflections on Moynihan's "attitude towards political liberalism." Hodgson also discusses the controversy surrounding the 1965 Moynihan Report and its impact on Moynihan personally.

The Moynihan Report is the starting point for the contributions from Daniel Aksamit and H. Howell Williams, though they are concerned with its contested legacy in the realm of policy making. Aksamit focuses on the War on Poverty and the attitudes of the policy makers that shaped it, and in particular their conception of a "culture of poverty," which was a central—and, argues Aksamit, much misunderstood—theme of the report. Williams explores one of the enduring concerns of Moynihan's political life, welfare and its effect on the American family, and analyzes the role of his 1965 report in making the trope of "personal responsibility" fundamental to later debates over welfare reform.

However, anti-poverty initiatives and welfare were not the only topics to occupy Moynihan's attention while he was at the Labor Department. He was also responsible for pioneering aesthetic guidelines for federal architecture. As Karen Patricia Heath's article shows, this is one of the most frequently overlooked aspects of Moynihan's career, and one largely untouched by the controversies that usually followed him. Nonetheless, Moynihan's influence on federal architecture policy was profound, and remained a preoccupation of his subsequent career as a bureaucrat and politician.

The final two contributions to this symposium find Moynihan grappling with the political, social, and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s. Though Moynihan worked in the administrations of all three of the 1960s presidents, for a three-year period after 1965, Moynihan was outside of the White House and estranged from the liberal policy makers that he once considered his allies. Daniel Rowe's article explores these "wilderness years," during which time Moynihan, as a professor at Harvard, developed a pointed critique of the War on Poverty and moved closer to the emerging "neoconservative" tendency. Unwilling to simply remove himself from the political fray, Moynihan argued that liberals and conservatives needed to develop new alliances and policies to resolve the social and racial crises of the "Sixties." It was this public openness to bipartisanship and calls to restore order that brought Moynihan to the attention of prominent Republican's like Richard Nixon.

In 1969, Moynihan took up a position on Nixon's White House Staff. In this role, his attention was occupied by the search for a remedy to the growing resentment of working-class whites to government welfare programs. This forms a backdrop to Oscar Winberg's article, which examines the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651600281X Published online by Cambridge University Press

"strange career" of Archie Bunker, the protagonist of the hugely popular sitcom, *All in the Family*. Bunker was a poorly-informed and bigoted, but ultimately lovable, working-class taxi driver from Queens, who became, as Winberg shows, a political icon in the 1970s, an unlikely folk hero and representative of Nixon's "Silent Majority."

The articles gathered in this symposium reflect the broad scope of Moynihan's involvement in twentieth-century American politics; a theme that featured prominently in our conference and which is underscored by the emerging scholarship. Each of the contributions to this symposium cast new light on Moynihan's concern with deep-seated changes taking place at the foundations of American life. From the War on Poverty to the New Left, Moynihan was dealing with problems that could not have been anticipated by earlier generations. Indeed, viewed in this way, his polymathic perspective on political affairs was a product of his desire to understand the peculiar problems of the mid-twentieth century in their full depth and breadth. This sensitivity to his times, combined with a voracious appetite for taking up new problems, highlight the importance of Moynihan as a figure through which to study the challenges and opportunities of recent American history and political science.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the fellows and staff at the Rothermere American Institute, University of Oxford, for their help in convening the conference on which this symposium is based. They would also like to thank all of the delegates who attended that conference, particularly those who delivered talks or papers. ■

REFERENCES

Barone, Michael and Grant Ujifusa. 1999. *The Almanac of American Politics 2000*. Washington, DC: National Journal.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration." *The Atlantic*. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-ageof-mass-incarceration/403246/.

Geary, Daniel. 2015. *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hayward, Steven F. 2001. *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964–1980*. Roseville, CA: Forum.

Hess, Stephen. 2015. *The Professor and the President: Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the Nixon White House*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Hodgson, Godfrey. 2000. *The Gentleman from New York: Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Katzmann, Robert A. ed. 1998. *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: The Intellectual in Public Life*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Schoen, Douglas E. 1979. *Pat: A Biography of Pat Moynihan*. New York: Harper & Row.

Troy, Gil. 2012. *Moynihan's Moment: America's Fight Against Zionism as Racism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Gets Daniel Patrick Moynihan All Wrong," *The Daily Beast*. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/20/ta-nehisi-coates-gets-daniel-patrickmoynihan-all-wrong.html.

Weiner, Greg. 2015a. *American Burke: The Uncommon Liberalism of Daniel Patrick Moynihan*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.

———. 2015b. "In Defense of Pat Moynihan." *Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-weiner/in-defense-of-daniel-patr_b_8158876.html.

Weisman, Steven R. ed. 2010. *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary*. New York: PublicAffairs.

SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

Daniel Aksamit *is an instructor at Clarkson College, in Nebraska. His work focuses on poverty and its interpreted origins, as well as healthcare studies, domestic and international. He can be reached at aksamitdaniel@clarksoncollege.edu.*

Patrick Andelic *is a teaching assistant at Queen Mary University of London. His work has looked at the political history of the United States, particularly the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the late 1900's. An article of his concerning American Liberalism in the same era was published in* The Historical Journal. *He can be reached at p.andelic@qmul.ac.uk.*

Karen Patricia Heath *is a history tutor at the University of Oxford. Her research centers around twentieth-century United States history, politics, policy, culture, and art. She may be reached at karen.heath@stclares.ac.uk.*

Godfrey Hodgson *is the author of* The Gentleman from New York: Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Biography *(New York, 2000). He may be reached at godfrey.hodgson@dsl.pipex.com.*

Louisa Hotson *is a PhD candidate at the University of Oxford. She explores the development of American political science in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Her research considers the discipline, as a profession and as a science, in the context of a broader changes in American political and intellectual history. She has an undergraduate degree in Politics from Durham University, and an MA in US History and Politics from the Institute for the Study of the Americas, London. She may be reached at Louisa.hotson@ccc.ox.ac.uk.*

Daniel Rowe *is a PhD candidate at the University of Oxford. His research explores the way the economic and political landscape has been shaped by the business community, labor unions, and political action outside of the realm of electoral politics. He may be reached at Daniel.rowe@history.ox.ac.uk.*

H. Howell Williams *is an assistant professor of political science at Western Connecticut State University. He researches political communication, political ideology, neoliberal social policy and gender. He may be reached at h.howell.williams@gmail.com.*

Oscar Winberg *is a PhD candidate in history at Abo Akademi University and contributing editor of* Humor in America, *a blog dedicated to the discussion of humor in America. He may be reached at owinberg@abo.fi.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651600281X Published online by Cambridge University Press