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IDEAS | ESSAY

## The Odd Couple: Nixon and Moynihan

In 1968, the liberal intellectual and the law-and-order president came up with an influential new strategy for fighting poverty



President Richard Nixon (left) with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, his urban affairs adviser, in 1970. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Joseph Dorman*

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Fifty years ago next month, Richard Nixon won the presidency in a politically divided America, running on a campaign of “law and order.” Over the course of the 1960s, civil rights marches had given way to rioting in many inner cities, and student protests had evolved from picketing to the seizure of campus buildings. Many Americans saw Nixon as the sort of tough-minded conservative who could deal with this upheaval.

So it came as a surprise when the president-elect named the Harvard professor Daniel Patrick Moynihan as his top adviser on America’s urban problems. After all, Moynihan—a Democrat who had served in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and was one of the architects of the Great Society—had complained on national television during the campaign that “you can have law and order in a penal camp, [but] you haven’t achieved much.”

Moynihan was indeed a committed liberal, but at that point he was an unhappy one. In 1965, white and black radicals had pilloried him as the author of “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” an internal Labor Department paper thereafter known as the “Moynihan Report.” The study predicted that the rise in single-parent families among African-Americans would seriously harm economic progress for blacks.

When the report was leaked, the press highlighted Moynihan’s fiery rhetoric and oversimplified his complex argument. His critics accused him of blaming African-American culture for the problems of the African-American family. In fact, Moynihan believed that endemic racism and economic injustice were the culprits and that deindustrialization was robbing inner cities of high-paying jobs for black men.

By 1967, Moynihan was furious at student radicals who, he felt, had no regard for authority. He

gave a speech to the liberal cold warriors of Americans for Democratic Action, stressing that their own “essential interest [was] in the stability of the social order.” Amid the chaos of the 1960s, he said, it was necessary to “seek out and make more effective alliances with political conservatives who share that concern.”

Candidate Nixon took notice. As a campaigner, he loved playing political hardball. He had red-baited his way into Congress in the 1940s, and in the 1968 campaign he had employed what political analyst Kevin Phillips called the “Southern strategy,” attracting white voters who were alienated by Lyndon Johnson’s civil rights legislation.

But Nixon was also a sophisticated student of policy, and he knew that the police alone weren’t going to solve the problems of America’s inner cities. He needed an adviser to help him forge an effective domestic policy, so he created a new Council on Urban Affairs, with Moynihan at its head.

‘Nixon loved being treated like a fellow intellectual by Moynihan.’

Over the next 18 months, the relationship between the two men deepened. Stephen

Hess, a presidential historian and Moynihan’s chief of staff at the time, explained that Nixon “had a tendency to ‘fall in love’ with those who worked for him. And it happened with Pat Moynihan at exactly the right time.”

Nixon had campaigned on getting people off the welfare rolls; he railed against dependency and government waste. Yet in the fall of 1969, under Moynihan’s tutelage, Nixon proposed a program that would have vastly expanded welfare spending. The existing program of Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), as welfare was then called, had been designed to help unemployed single mothers. Nixon’s new Family Assistance Plan (FAP) was supposed to provide a minimum income for every family in America.

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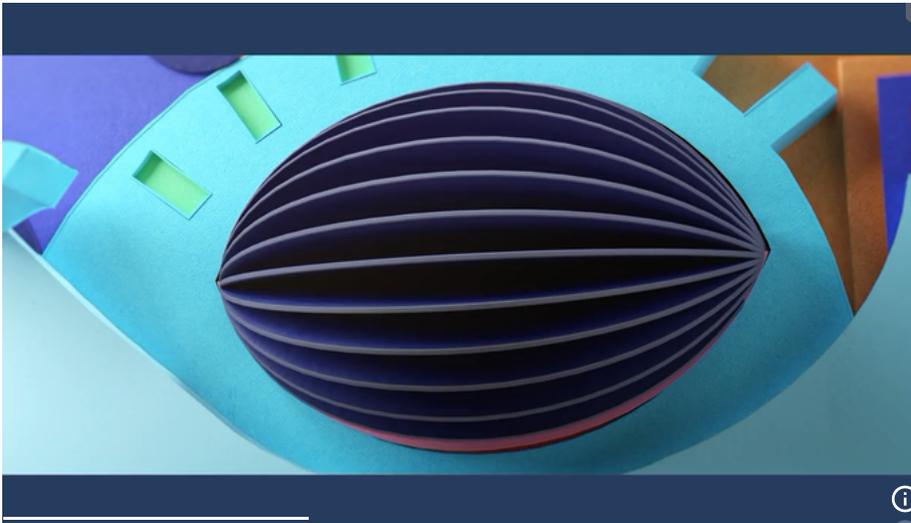
The press was dumbfounded, and both left and right were thrown into disarray. For conservatives, FAP was a political betrayal and a gargantuan giveaway. Though many liberals praised the program, others on the left insisted that the proposed amount—\$1,600 a year (about \$11,000 today)—was so small that it was an insult to the poor. Thanks to Moynihan, Nixon had surprised everybody.

Moynihan accomplished this remarkable feat by appealing to Nixon’s own memories of poverty, as well as to his political ambition. He gave the president a biography of the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli to read. His message: Just as the great Tory had pushed his conservative party toward policies aimed at the relief of poverty, so might Nixon lead reluctant Republicans. Nixon loved being treated like a fellow intellectual by Moynihan. And the idea of beating the liberals of the Kennedy-Johnson era at their own game must have been irresistible.



In 1995, Sen. Moynihan argued against President Clinton's plans for welfare reform. PHOTO: MIKE THEILER/REUTERS

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Moynihan had been frustrated by the War on Poverty's focus on social engineering over a more straightforward—though more expensive—jobs program. In 1969, he published a withering book-length critique of the Johnson administration's Community Action Project. He argued that federal bureaucrats were misguided in believing they could solve African-American poverty by creating "grass roots" leaders to agitate for change. As Moynihan pointed out, big-city mayors were enraged by this intervention in local politics and mightily resisted the program.

"We're trying to bring government back" to what it "knows how to do," Moynihan would explain as he promoted FAP. One of those things was distributing money—that was the lesson, as he saw it, of Social Security's success. FAP could end poverty, not just for the unemployed but for the working poor as well.

Ultimately, FAP was killed by attacks from both the left and the right, and Moynihan departed the Nixon administration at the end of 1969. But the idea of FAP didn't die. By 1975, it had

evolved into the less ambitious but widely admired Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which gave financial assistance to working families. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration would quietly but significantly boost funding for EITC while very publicly working to reform welfare with the help of Republicans in Congress.

Although Moynihan was a strong believer in welfare reform, he roundly attacked the final legislation for ending the federal guarantee of aid to the poor. In 1995, as an eminence of the U.S. Senate, he unleashed a stinging jeremiad, angrily predicting that family and childhood poverty would increase.

In its first years, the rosy results of welfare reform seemed to refute Moynihan's concerns. Today, however, the effectiveness of the Clinton-era initiative remains a subject of fierce debate. Though many poor Americans departed the welfare rolls for work during the boom years of the late 1990s, the recessions of 2001 and 2008 found large numbers of them vulnerable. And while EITC has bolstered the prospects of the working-class poor, those in deep poverty—with incomes below 50% of the official poverty level—have been hurt by the limits placed on welfare.

Meanwhile, some 50 years after President Nixon proposed it, FAP is making a comeback under a new name: the Universal Basic Income. This time, however, the idea has advocates on both the left and the right, if not very much mainstream support. It's a powerful testament to the continuing relevance of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a brilliant public servant whose ideas were always grounded in facts rather than ideology.

—*Mr. Dorman is the writer and co-director of the new documentary, "Moynihan."*

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