

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, pictured here in a Senate office building in 1994, served as U.S. senator from New York between 1977 and 2001.

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MOYNIHAN AND THE SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY

THE 1965 REPORT AND ITS BACKLASH

IN LATE 1964, Daniel Patrick “Pat” Moynihan was a largely unknown 37-year-old assistant secretary of labor in the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson. A liberal Democrat who had been an aide to Governor Averell Harriman of New York in the 1950s, Moynihan enthusiastically supported John F. Kennedy, a fellow Irish Catholic, in 1960. With the help of friends, he landed a low-level position in the Labor Department in 1961.

Like many liberals during the hopeful early 1960s, Moynihan cherished a “can-do” faith in the capacity of expert knowledge and governmental action to improve the quality of life. Having grown up in New York City in a broken family (his father left when Pat was 10 years old), he believed, as did many Catholic thinkers, that solid families were the basic institutions of social organization. In early 1963, he produced a report, titled “One-Third of a Nation,” that documented very high percentages of young black men in single-parent families who failed mental and physical tests for the military draft. Later that year, he and Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer published a well-received book, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, that emphasized the staying power of family, ethnic, racial, and religious identifications in American life.

Though Moynihan helped develop LBJ’s War on Poverty in 1964, and cheered enactment of a historic Civil Rights Act, also in 1964, he thought that much more had to be done to help black Americans attain anything resembling socioeconomic equality with whites. As he put it in a memo to Willard Wirtz, then secretary of labor, in April 1964, “The Negroes are asking for unequal treatment. More seriously, it may be that without unequal treatment, there is no way for them to achieve anything like equal status in the long run.” With this idea in mind, one that seemed to prefigure what was later called affirmative action, he decided in December 1964 to write a report about low-income black family life in the United States.

With statistical aid from experts in the Labor Department—Moynihan was neither a sociologist nor a demographer—he started his research on January 1, 1965. Consulting scholars and civil rights activists, he also delved into major books concerned with African American history and contemporary race relations. These works, by W. E. B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier, Gunnar Myrdal, Kenneth Clark, and others, emphasized that a long history of white racism had savaged African American life. Within the amazingly short span of three

by JAMES T. PATTERSON

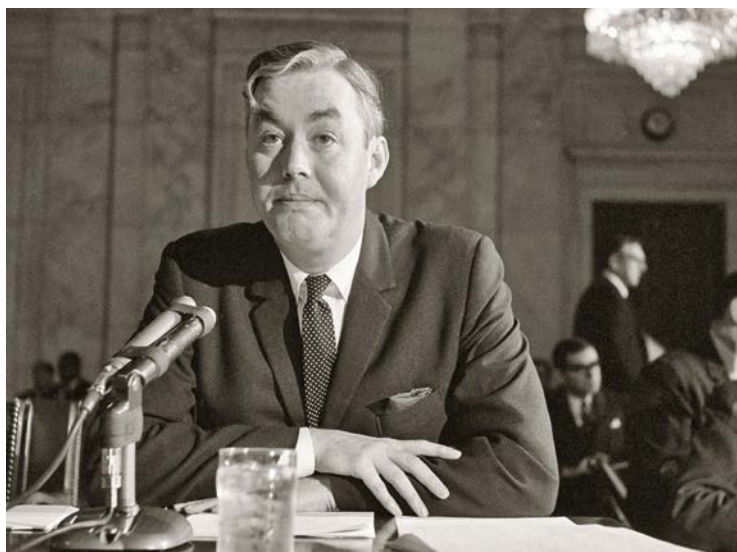
months he completed a report titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” Seventy-eight pages long, it consisted of 48 pages of text backed by 61 footnotes and an appendix of 24 pages of charts and tables. In March 1965, the Labor Department printed 100 copies of his work.

Moynihan aimed his in-house report at Johnson administration officials, not at the general public. The document did not divulge his name. Its title page carried the words, “For Official Use Only.” But he was a well-read and convivial man who had cultivated useful friendships in Washington. In distributing his report, he fired off urgent memorandums to recipients. One such message, directed to LBJ, argued, “equal *opportunity* for Negroes [as promised in the War on Poverty and the 1964 Civil Rights Act] does not produce equal results—because the *Negroes today are a grievously injured people who in fair and equal competition will by and large lose out.*” He reminded Johnson, “You were born poor. You were brought up poor. Yet

to come unless a new and special effort is made.”

Moynihan explained why this would not happen. “First, the racist virus in the American blood stream still afflicts us: Negroes will encounter serious personal prejudice for at least another generation. Second, three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment have taken their toll on the Negro people.” He emphasized, “The circumstances of the Negro American community in recent years has probably been getting *worse, not better.*”

Offering data concerning black poverty, unemployment, crime, juvenile delinquency, narcotics use, and serious educational disadvantage, Moynihan maintained that the deep roots of this “crisis” lay in American slavery. White racism, mass migrations, and the urbanization of the black population, he added, further disorganized black families in the 20th century. Though he pointed out that some Negroes were managing to move into the middle class, he focused on documenting what he argued was the deteriorating situation of impoverished black families in the inner cities: “The family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown.” This was the “fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time.”



Moynihan in 1966, appearing before the Senate Government Operations subcommittee during hearings on urban problems

you came of age full of ambition, energy, and ability. Because your father and mother gave it to you. The richest inheritance any child can have is a stable, loving, disciplined family life.”

“The Negro Family” featured eye-catching prose—much of it in bold face or italics or both (attributes maintained herein)—supported by a wealth of clearly presented and accurate statistical data. It opened with the dramatic statement, “The United States is approaching a new crisis in race relations.” American Negroes, he added, now have expectations that “will go beyond civil rights.... They will now expect that in the near future equal opportunities for them as a group will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups.” But, Moynihan wrote, “This is not going to happen. Nor will it happen for generations

The Diagnosis

Moynihan, a man of his time, believed that fathers must ordinarily be the breadwinners in American families, and he had much to say about “illegitimacy” (the word generally used at the time to identify out-of-wedlock pregnancy). The percentage of white births in the U.S. that was illegitimate, he wrote, had inched upward from 2 percent in 1940 to 3 percent in 1963. The black percentage, however, had jumped during these years from 16.8 percent to 23.6 percent, thereby remaining roughly eight times higher than among whites. Black divorce rates, too, had increased: in 1940 these had been the same for blacks and whites, but by 1964 the nonwhite (here as elsewhere he meant Negro) percentage had become 40 percent higher than that among whites. The result, he wrote, was that **“Almost One-Fourth of Negro Families are Headed by Females.”**

“Incredible mistreatment” over the past three centuries, Moynihan continued, had forced Negro families in the United States into a “matriarchal structure.” This was not necessarily a bad thing, he added, but because such a structure was “so out of line with the rest of the American society,” it “seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.” American society “presumes male leadership in private and public affairs.... A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.”



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A consequence of these trends, Moynihan emphasized, was a **“Startling Increase in Welfare Dependency”** among American Negroes. Largely because of broken families, he wrote, 56 percent of nonwhite children received means-tested public assistance at some time in their lives under the nation’s Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which mainly assisted female-headed families. By contrast, this figure was 9 percent among white children. Stunned to discover that the number of new AFDC cases opened for nonwhites was increasing even as nonwhite male unemployment rates in the prosperous early 1960s were slowly decreasing, he speculated that something deeper than economic hardship alone was beginning to damage lower-class black families, which were falling apart even as the overall economy was exhibiting vibrant growth.

For all these reasons, a **“Tangle of Pathology,”** the heading of his longest chapter, was “tightening” over lower-class black Americans. “Most Negro youth,” he wrote, “are in *danger* of being caught up” in it. “Many of those who escape do so for one generation only: as things now are, their children may have to run the gauntlet all over again.” This was a frightening situation that “may indeed have begun to feed on itself” and that was “capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.”

What was to be done? Moynihan, believing that the “pathologies” troubling black families were deep, interrelated, and complicated, privately favored a range of solutions, including greater access to birth control, generous family allowances such as those available in Western European democracies, and (mainly for males) substantial public-works programs. He also recommended military service, where there was an “utterly masculine world,” for young black men. It was clear from the report that he agonized most about the effects of job



Moynihan reported that by 1964, almost one-fourth of black families were headed by females.

discrimination and unemployment on young black males, which (except during World War II and the Korean War years) had been at “*disaster levels for 35 years.*”

A brief closing section, titled “The Case for National Action,” showed that he hoped for vigorous federal responses. In boldface, he concluded: **The policy of the United States [should be] to bring the Negro American to full and equal sharing in the responsibilities and rewards of citizenship. To this end, the programs of the Federal government bearing on this objective shall be designed to have the effect, directly or indirectly, of enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro American family.**

But his report was diagnostic, not a blueprint for cure. Seeking to stimulate the formation of carefully planned and

well-informed governmental policies, Moynihan did not provide a wish list of proposed solutions.

The Hope

Key officials in the Johnson administration reacted enthusiastically to the report. Labor secretary Wirtz relayed a Moynihan memo to LBJ in which he wrote, “The attached Memorandum is nine pages of dynamite about the Negro situation.” Whether Johnson read the report is unknown, but he was clearly aware of its thrust and of the excitement it had evoked among advisers. He soon asked Moynihan to help write a major speech on the subject to be delivered at the graduation ceremonies of Howard University, a black institution, in early June.

The speech that Moynihan quickly co-wrote with presidential speechwriter Richard Goodwin hailed the strides toward “freedom” that recent civil-rights legislation was accelerat-

“The family,” he emphasized, “is the cornerstone of our society.” He announced that he would convene a White House Conference in the fall featuring “scholars, and experts, and outstanding Negro leaders—men of both races—and officials of government at every level.” The theme and title of the conference would be “To Fulfill These Rights.”

Civil rights leaders hailed Johnson’s address. Martin Luther King Jr. declared, “Never before has a president articulated the depths and dimensions [of the problems] more eloquently and profoundly.” Johnson himself later said, and rightly so, that this was his greatest civil-rights speech.

The Fallout

There was ample reason at that time for Johnson and Moynihan to hope for public action, because a powerful tide of American liberalism was then cresting at an unprecedentedly high level. By June 1965, a heavily Democratic Congress had either enacted or was about to enact a host of ambitious Great Society programs—an Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare, Medicaid, a Voting Rights Act, reform of racist immigration law—that Johnson, a relentless advocate, had been urging upon it.

Historic developments in the pivotal summer of 1965, however, transformed the political climate in the United States, thereby deeply darkening the context in which the report was to enter the public realm. One was enormous military escalation, publicly announced in late July, of the nation’s involvement in Vietnam. This absorbed Johnson’s attention, diverted massive federal funds to the war effort, and unleashed increasingly furious political acrimony.

A little later, in early August, five days of violent and widely televised black demonstrations ravaged the Watts area of Los Angeles. Militant black leaders, realizing that they had failed to recognize the extent of Negro rage in the cities, hastened to make amends by demanding far-reaching reforms. Many Americans, however, were shocked and appalled by the turbulence. The bloody “Watts Riot,” as it was called, was a disaster for the interracial, nonviolent civil rights movement—and for liberal hopes in general.

Even as these developments were threatening liberal aspirations, passages from the report, which had remained in-house until then, were being leaked, whereupon it became known publicly as “The Moynihan Report.” Most of the early press accounts accurately described the document (or what they



President Lyndon B. Johnson meets with civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1965

ing. But, Johnson continued, “Freedom is not enough,” and explained, “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘You are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.... We seek not just freedom but opportunity—not just legal equity but human ability—not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and as a result.”

While Johnson did not specify what government ought to do, he promised to take action to improve black education, health care, employment, and housing, and especially to devise “social programs better designed to hold families together.”



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had read of it) as a well-intentioned liberal effort to promote intra-administration discussion of a serious social issue.

By September, however, a firestorm of controversy had begun to explode. Some commentators, alarmed to discover that a number of conservative and mainstream journalists were interpreting the report as indicating the need for racial self-help, worried that it would lead people to “blame the victim.” Others seized upon Moynihan’s dramatic phrases, notably “tangle of pathology,” and accused him of painting a poisonously negative picture of black culture while at the same time failing to prescribe antidotes. A few angry writers branded him as a racist. James Farmer, head of the Congress of Racial Equality, later denounced the report as a “massive cop-out for the white conscience.” He added, “We are sick unto death of being analyzed, mesmerized,

bought, sold, and slobbered over, while the same evils that are the ingredients of our oppression go unattended.”

Comments such as Farmer’s were unfair: Moynihan obviously empathized with the black poor. But it was his bad luck that parts of the report became public at such a tempestuous (post-Watts) time in the modern history of American race relations. It was also obvious that he should have thought twice before employing such high-octane phrases as “tangle of pathology.” Black writers like Kenneth Clark, who had detailed black “pathology” in his recently published book, *Dark Ghetto*, might be extolled for detailing black social problems. But a white man, who was highlighting the rise of black illegitimacy and of “pathologies,” would not be. Moynihan, a white messenger of unpleasant news, was vulnerable, a figure who could be disarmed and shot at.

President Johnson hoped to avoid a break with increasingly militant black leaders and quickly distanced himself from the report. He announced that the promised White House conference would be a smaller affair in November that would concern itself only with planning a larger meeting to take place in mid-1966. By that time, the civil rights movement was falling into disarray, and the conference, packed by LBJ with loyalists, accomplished nothing.

Moynihan, as it happened, left the Johnson administration in July 1965 to run (unsuccessfully) for the presidency of the New York City Council. He was thus in no position to act as an official spokesman for his report. But he was deeply hurt that LBJ had appeared to abandon it and that he was not even invited to attend the November meeting. The administration, he wrote later, had “promptly dissociated itself from the whole issue.” He added, a “vacuum” then developed, and “no black would go near the subject. And until one did no white man could do so without incurring the wrath of a community grown rather too accustomed to epithet.” He complained privately to a friend in late 1965, “If my head were sticking on a pike at the South-West Gate to the White House grounds, the impression would hardly be greater.”

Critics who charged him with “blaming the victim” especially infuriated him. When the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote to assure him that the report was a “terrifyingly accurate study of the disintegration of the Negro family,” he replied to Mrs. Niebuhr saying, “The whole affair has become a nightmare of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and misstatement.” Later, he wrote that far from blaming the victim, he could be accused of “almost misstating evidence in order to avoid any implication of blame.”

Kenneth Clark was another who deplored attacks on the report. He said of its critics, “It’s kind of a wolf pack operating in a very undignified way. If Pat is a racist, I am. He highlights the total pattern of segregation and discrimination. Is a doctor responsible for a disease simply because he diagnoses it?” Moynihan thanked Clark, a friend, for standing by him, and mused, “In moments of fury I sometimes think we are about to repeat the tragedy of Reconstruction: Liberty Without Equality.”

The Question Remains

Moynihan went on to become a professor at Harvard University, hold high offices in the Republican administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, and serve as a Democratic

senator from New York between 1977 and 2001. As a prolific writer and renowned public intellectual, he frequently explored trends in American race relations and family life, hailing, for instance, the controversial report, “Equality of Educational Opportunity” (1966), by his friend James Coleman, which stressed the relationship between broken families and poor student performance in the public schools.

But criticisms of his report continued to appear from time to time, some of them in the 1970s and thereafter from feminists who assailed what they regarded as his support of patriarchal families. Still hurt, he distanced himself from left-oriented figures. After 1965, when community-action programs within the War on Poverty encountered substantial problems, he toned down his once strong faith in governmental expertise, emphasizing that some Great Society liberals had “lost a sense of limits.” Though he continued to call himself a liberal and a Democrat, he associated closely with neo-conservative writers such as Glazer, James Wilson, and Irving Kristol.

Then and later he also deplored post-1965 trends afflicting American race relations and family life. At most times since the mid-1970s, black male unemployment has been roughly twice as high as among white men, and the black poverty rate has been roughly three times higher. Drug-related arrests have contributed to staggeringly high growth in the numbers of incarcerated black men. Most African American children, especially those in low-income or single-parent families, enter 1st grade with already large cognitive disadvantages, which then grow in the higher grades.

Thanks in considerable part to powerful cultural trends, which have featured ever more insistent popular demands for personal freedom, marriage rates since the 1960s have tumbled, and percentages of births that are out of wedlock have escalated throughout much of the economically developed Western world. Among non-Hispanic African Americans, this percentage jumped from the 23.6 percent that Moynihan had identified for 1963 to more than 70 percent, where it has stayed since the mid-1990s. The rate among whites, 3 percent in 1963, has reached 30 percent. Overall, 41 percent of births today in the United States are out-of-wedlock.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as trends like these began to arouse widespread commentary, conservative writers such as Charles Murray blamed public welfare programs for undermining black family life in the U.S. Other conservatives since the 1980s, misreading Moynihan’s message, have cited his report



The psychologist Kenneth Clark, a leader in the civil rights movement, deplored attacks on the Moynihan Report.



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as evidence to support cutbacks in social spending and to call for a moral revitalization of black culture.

Moynihan disagreed sharply with such conservative views, pointing out (as he had done in his report) that welfare spending was a necessary response to need, not a source of dependency, and rejecting any notion that he had blamed the victim. Moreover, he did as much as anyone in public life after 1965 to develop policies aimed at strengthening families, white as well as black. During the Nixon years, he championed a Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which if enacted (it wasn't) would have provided a guaranteed annual income to many poor people. As a senator, he promoted liberal social ideas, including family allowances. What poor families needed most of all from government, he often argued, was more income, not more services. He also emerged as a leading proponent of a federal tax credit for low-income families who send their children to private schools.

With the passage of time, a few black spokespeople, liberals among them, began to speak out for the ideas of Moynihan's report. Since the mid-1980s, they have notably included the sociologist William Julius Wilson and the activist Eleanor Holmes Norton. In *The Audacity of Hope*, President Barack Obama complained that some “liberal policy makers and civil rights leaders had erred” when “in their urgency to avoid blaming the victims of historical racism, they tended to downplay or ignore evidence that entrenched behavioral patterns among the black poor really were contributing to intergenerational poverty.”

As statements such as Obama's indicate, most commentators today appear to believe that Moynihan was right in 1965 and that his attackers had been unfair. Some people have hailed him as a prophet. But not even Moynihan had imagined in 1965 that growth in the percentages of out-of-wedlock births would become so enormous. Then and later he emphasized that problems affecting families were extraordinarily complex and that there were no easy answers (which is a reason why he had not enumerated cures in his report). In 1992, he wrote Hillary

Clinton that serious study of the family was “the most important issue of social policy,” but added, “I picked up the early tremors, and have followed the subject for thirty years now. But haven't the faintest notion as to what, realistically, can be done.”

In 2002, a year before Moynihan died, he was a keynote speaker at a conference of experts concerning international trends affecting family life. His message was pessimistic. Cohabitation, he pointed out, was “neither stable nor long-



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term.” The rise in fatherless families deeply disadvantaged children. It still remained risky for white writers to highlight black family problems. And social science seemed unable to develop a national family policy. “We are nowhere near a general theory of family change,” he asserted. “And there we shall leave it, the question still standing: who indeed can tell us what happened to the American family?”

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