

THE
GREAT SOCIETY

THE TRIUMPH AND THE TRAGEDY

AT FIFTY



Nicholas Eberstadt



AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

The Great Society at Fifty:

The Triumph and the Tragedy

By Nicholas Eberstadt



AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

*To the memory of Irving Kristol (1920–2009),
who taught us about unintended consequences
and much else.*

The Great Society at Fifty: The Triumph and the Tragedy

May 22, 2014, marks the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's "Great Society" address, delivered at the spring commencement for the University of Michigan. That speech is a milestone in American history.

It remains the most ambitious call to date by any American president (our current commander in chief included) to use the awesome powers of the American state to affect a far-reaching transformation for the society that state was established to serve. It also stands as the high-water mark for Washington's confidence in the broad meliorative properties of government social policy, scientifically applied.

No less important, the Great Society pledge, and the fruit this would ultimately bear, profoundly recast the common understanding of the ends of governance in our country. The address heralded fundamental changes—some then already underway, others then still only being envisioned—that would decisively expand the scale and scope of government in American life and greatly alter the relationship between that same government and the governed under our constitution.

Indeed, it is not too much to suggest that most, if not all, Americans today are, in a meaningful sense, the children of the Great Society: Republicans and Democrats alike, self-styled conservatives as well as *soi-disant* progressives. So deeply impressed is the Great Society into our consciousness that, as a practical matter, it is scarcely possible for most citizens now alive even to imagine the American way of life in the days before our huge, activist, modern welfare state came into existence.

2 THE GREAT SOCIETY AT FIFTY

I

In his Great Society oration, LBJ offered a grand political vision of what an American welfare state—big, generous, and interventionist—might accomplish. Difficult as this may be at times to recall, the United States in the early 1960s was not yet a modern welfare state: our only nationwide social program in those days was the Social Security system, which provided benefits for workers' retirement and disability and for orphaned or abandoned children of workers.

Johnson had gradually been unveiling this vision, starting with his declaration of a "War on Poverty" in his first State of the Union months earlier in 1964, just weeks after John F. Kennedy's assassination.¹ But the elimination of poverty and discrimination—problems in America since the founding and, indeed, scourges of humanity since the beginning of time—was not the final objective of this vision. Rather, this was just the starting point: "The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning."²

The Great Society proposed to reach even further: to bring about wholesale renewal of our cities, beautification of our natural surroundings, vitalization of our educational system. All this, and much more—and the solutions to the many questions encountered in this great endeavor, we were told, would assuredly be found, since this undertaking would "assemble the best thought and the broadest knowledge from all over the world to find those answers for America."

Memorably, Johnson insisted that the constraints on achieving the goals he outlined were not availability of the national wealth necessary for the task or the uncertainties inherent in such complex human enterprises, but instead simply the fiber of our country's moral resolution—whether we as a polity possessed sufficient "wisdom" to embark on the venture itself—for, in his words, "the challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization."

For a lesser politician, the Great Society speech might have amounted to little more than lofty rhetoric. For LBJ, on the other hand, it was an actual blueprint for the future. With Johnson's consummate legislative skills, honed over his years as Senate majority leader, and with the coming 1964 electoral landslide for his party, the Great Society vision would be swiftly implemented: through civil rights laws, a panoply of new social programs (Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, and so forth), new federal agencies (the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Transportation), and a vast array of other federal social projects.

What began under Johnson continued—or more often, expanded—under all successive presidents to date. Not even Ronald Reagan managed to reverse the growth of government set in motion by that call for the Great Society. Thus, the American welfare state as we know it today is very largely the outcome of forces Johnson unleashed in the first half-year of his presidency. (The most appreciable addition to this apparatus over the past half-century is arguably “Obamacare,” the health care guarantees forged into law under the Affordable Care Act of 2010.)

Half a century later, how should we assess the Great Society? What has been its legacy—both for good and for ill—for those alive today, who have inherited a world so decisively shaped by it?

Any attempt at a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the entirety of the Great Society crusade would demand vastly more space than an essay allows, given its audacity and the enormity of the territory it laid claims to conquer—or, more precisely, to improve. Everywhere Johnson cast his eye, he seemed to find an America in need of improvement, and the intended improvements of American life enumerated in this short speech span virtually a 360-degree horizon. Environmental protection, community development, the arts—all of these and much more are flagged as legitimate new areas for federal government involvement under the banner of the Great Society.

From one perspective, of course, the Great Society would be considered a complete and total failure on its very face. This is the point of view that maintains the US federal government has no business

4 THE GREAT SOCIETY AT FIFTY

whatever arrogating the right to intrude into so many previously private—or at the very least, unfederalized—aspects of American life, and that the initiative self-evidently reduces our individual liberties. Such a standpoint is not peculiar to a single school of thought in modern America, but rather reverberates among many of them: libertarians, federal minimalists, constitutional originalists, and others. Although such arguments may be currently unpopular, they are neither unprincipled nor philosophically incoherent.

One conversation about the Great Society—and by no means a trivial one—therefore, concludes almost as soon as it begins. Yet we may wish to continue with other conversations about the Great Society: not least of these concerning the performance and attainment of our government in the realms of policy that the government assigned itself in 1964 and ever after. In that case, we are obliged to judge the half-century of laws and social policy unleashed by the Great Society on the vision's own immense, if not positively heroic, terms. And if we wish to focus on the central agenda of the Great Society, we must consider post-1964 America's record on two ostensibly separate but actually tightly related fronts: civil rights and poverty alleviation.

II

To begin by stating the obvious, America's history of race relations is unhappy—indeed, positively tortured. The glaring flaw (in President Obama's apt words, the “original sin”³) in the American political experiment at the time of our founding was the acceptance of the institution of hereditary slavery, imposed upon only Africans, who were sold and transported across the world so that they and their descendants might toil with no rights of their own for a self-conceived citadel of liberty. After a frightful Civil War fought to free these victims, their progeny still had to endure another full century of segregation and legalized discrimination.

The Great Society ushered in a succession of landmark laws (beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 24th Amendment, and the Voting Rights of 1965), as well as a number of presidentially issued executive orders, intended to end legal discrimination against minorities in all its forms throughout the nation, and especially in the South, once and for all. Finally, American blacks could no longer legally be rejected or excluded from jobs, housing, and all the rest (as had so routinely occurred in so much of America) on the basis of their race; at last, African Americans could not be prevented from exercising their right to vote through local regulations and restrictions, or other, more cunning, subterfuges.

The Great Society did not rely on legislation and decrees alone in combating discriminatory practices: to the contrary, a crucial feature of this campaign for ending racial discrimination was to empower the US Department of Justice to embark on a far-reaching quest to bring a rapid federal response to grievances against individuals, localities, or states—and even further, to seek out possible problems and litigate over them aggressively. The new sway of the federal authorities for these purposes was extraordinary, and enduring. Only in 2013, for example, did a Supreme Court ruling finally decide that nine Southern states (and dozens of counties and municipalities outside the South) no longer needed to clear their electoral procedures in advance with the Justice Department or a federal court.

One direct consequence of this civil rights strategy was a pronounced shift in the previously understood constitutional balance of power between the federal government and the states, with a corresponding encroachment on, or loss of, previously accepted “states’ rights.” But there was more at play than the redefinition, and diminution, of what had historically been states’ rights under the new civil rights apparatus, daring as that in itself may have been.

In purely practical terms, operationalizing the Justice Department’s antidiscrimination agenda proved unexpectedly problematic given our legal system’s presumption of innocence for defendants and insistence on a preponderance of evidence on behalf of the plaintiff, even in civil suits. *Intent* to discriminate being often difficult or impossible to prove, courts in their deliberations and rulings

6 THE GREAT SOCIETY AT FIFTY

came increasingly to accept mere *inferences about intent*, drawing on social science research and probability theory: in effect ruling, for instance, that discrimination was “proved” if the odds that a certain racial distribution of jobs in a certain factory could have occurred by pure chance were below some particular threshold. Such methods all but guaranteed that de facto innocents would forever after be flagged as de jure “offenders” because of the inescapable problem of false positives inherent in such statistical techniques. And ironically, zealous pursuit of what would become known as “affirmative action” in favor of groups that had suffered discrimination in the past would sometimes subject other citizens to reverse discrimination through no fault of their own, other than being born into a non-“affirmed” ethnicity: thus our brave new world of quotas, set-asides, preferences, and goals.

In short, the Great Society attempt to eliminate racial injustice entailed injustices of its own—many of them unintended, some of them major and lasting. But the conversation cannot stop there—not if we are serious about the guarantee of constitutional liberties to all Americans, irrespective of color. If the instrumentalities of the Great Society were flawed, then what instead? Were better alternatives actually available back in 1964 for redressing America’s civil rights problems?

The limited-government, Constitution-minded alternative to the Great Society template was offered by political leaders like Republican Senator Barry Goldwater (who ran against LBJ in the 1964 election and lost to him by a landslide).⁴ In *Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), Goldwater—himself, recall, a sometime member of the Arizona NAACP and a proponent of what was then called “racial tolerance”—carefully outlined this alternative worldview:

I deny there *can* be a conflict between States’ Rights, properly defined, and civil rights, properly defined. If States’ “Rights” are so asserted as to encroach upon individual rights that are protected by valid federal laws, then the exercise of state power is a nullity. Conversely, if individual “rights” are so asserted as to infringe upon valid state power, then the assertion of those “rights” is a nullity. . . .

I believe that the problem of race relations, like all social and cultural problems, is best handled by the people directly concerned. Social and cultural change, however desirable, should not be effected by the engines of national power. Let us, through persuasion and education, seek to improve institutions we deem defective. But let us, in doing so, respect the orderly processes of the law. Any other course enthrones tyrants and dooms freedom.⁵

This is, I would submit, an entirely principled and intellectually coherent counterargument. Yet, read from today's vantage point, there is also something quite awful about it.

Knowing as we do full well the sort of institutionalized degradation black Americans were suffering at the time these words were written, Goldwater's declaration on civil rights sounds steeped in what we now would call denial and wishful thinking. His formulation betrays scarcely any recognition of the enormity of the violations those Americans were suffering on a daily basis under Jim Crow.

"Racial tolerance" may have been the watchword for many reformers back in those days, but the "tolerance" largely urged by such voices sounds today like toleration of the organic, evolutionary process that US civil society would undergo in which these racial wrongs would be corrected spontaneously and on their own—and for a seemingly indefinite period of time. Living memory at the time of Goldwater's writing—which, we may recall, would have spanned the period from *Plessy v. Ferguson* to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*—would surely not have suggested this "organic" process was advancing at anything like a tolerable speed.

Looking back at that alternative formula for addressing the civil rights problem from our present-day vantage point, we cannot avoid asking the obvious questions: Exactly when—if ever—would such an approach get around to eliminating legalized racial discrimination in the United States? Just how many generations do we guess it would have taken for the "competitive federalism" formula to have done away with all the ugly infringements on constitutional rights that were part of daily life in the real America of the early

8 THE GREAT SOCIETY AT FIFTY

1960s—and not only in the Deep South? How far would this alternative path have taken us between 1964 and, say, today?⁶

History does not afford the luxury of experimental reruns. Yet let it be said: from our current vantage point, the odds appear infinitesimally small that the “conservative” alternative to the Great Society civil rights push could have gotten us as close to a genuinely colorblind nationwide legal system as we are today. And if that is actually the case, then this “alternative” was not really an alternative at all.

Speaking realistically, it now looks as if the only way to have ended legal discrimination in America in a single generation would have been through massive federal intervention, more or less as it was ended in our actual history. And if this is more or less true, we must correspondingly recognize that the constitutional price for ending discrimination in post–World War II America—if this was ever to be ended—would all but inevitably be paid at the expense of limited government and the 10th Amendment. A smaller state with less centralized federal power simply would not have been up to the task of bringing a swift and permanent end to Jim Crow. It would require something a bit closer to Leviathan: and at the end of the day, that is exactly what America chose to summon for the mission.

Though we have ended legal discrimination in our country, this does not mean we have ended our country’s race problems. Today, however, these problems are not at heart legal—they are instead social and economic and attitudinal. The current dimensions of the lingering racial divide in America are demonstrated by the chasm separating black-and-white public opinion on the very question of whether we still have a race problem. For example, while the overwhelming majority of white respondents now say they believe that blacks have as good a chance as whites to get any job for which they are qualified, the overwhelming majority of black respondents disagree. Similar gaps in perception are revealed on a whole battery of questions concerning equality of treatment and equality of opportunity.⁷

That being said, progress toward the ideals of a colorblind and integrated society has not only been recorded in the law books. In

some respects, our existing America today might be almost unrecognizable to Americans from 1964.

Part of this enormous change had nothing at all to do with the Great Society and its intentions. Simultaneously, America has become a distinctly more multiethnic society since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (which was most explicitly separated from LBJ's civil rights agenda at the time). That law and its interpretation facilitated the entry and naturalization of would-be Americans from Asia, Latin America, and Africa on a scale previously unthinkable.

In the 1960 census, for example, "Negros" accounted for about 95 percent of the nonwhite population enumerated in that count. In the 2010 census, African Americans were only a minority within the minority: by then black Americans comprised just over one-third (35 percent) of the non-Anglo population, far outnumbered by the combined total for Latinos and Asian Americans.⁸ Millions of today's black Americans, moreover, are foreign-born immigrants from Africa or the Caribbean—nearly 1 in 10, in fact.⁹ Still more are the children or grandchildren of foreign-born blacks who migrated to the US after 1965. Thus is a larger share of America composed of nonwhite minorities today than at any time since our founding—while at the same time descendants of US slaves account for a smaller share of the American population than at practically any juncture in our history.

This remarkable shift speaks not only to the sheer arithmetic power of immigration in repeopling our country but also to changes in public consciousness and personal self-conceptions concerning racial and ethnic identity that have attended our new waves of immigration. The notion of a Latino identity, for example, was formalized only in 1970 by the official designation of a census category for persons of Spanish origin (later, Hispanic origin)—likewise, the notion of a multiracial identity in 2000, when the census began offering respondents the option of classifying themselves with more than one racial heritage. By 2010, 9 million Americans—roughly 3 percent of society—opted for such a self-identification.¹⁰

As a result of the post-1965 wave of non-European migration, America has a much more multicultural heritage today than half a

century ago—and America is much more aware of, and accommodating toward, its population’s increasingly diverse parentage and increasingly nuanced identities. The “American Dilemma” has to a considerable degree been depolarized by this influx of new Americans and would-be Americans; “race relations” is no longer a binary discussion, delimited to “whites” and descendants of slaves.

The past half-century of immigration has palpably blurred the old sociological “color line” in America. But progress in civil rights has also been a consequence of deliberate government actions. Segregation in housing and racial separation by residence, for example, are much less pronounced today than half a century ago: as Harvard’s Edward Glaeser and Duke’s Jacob Vigdor have shown, various statistical measures of urban segregation (black vs. nonblack) have steadily and markedly declined since 1970, some dropping by roughly half between 1960 and 2010.¹¹

By the same token, despite continuing socioeconomic disadvantages, African Americans have progressively advanced into the more privileged ranks in the US and are increasingly included within America’s elites.

By 2013, according to US Census Bureau estimates, more than one-quarter of American blacks in their late 30s had college degrees, and nearly one-tenth had an advanced professional or postgraduate degree.¹² The share of African Americans 25 years of age or older with four or more years of higher education by 2013 was five times higher than it had been in 1964.¹³ By 2012, mean household income for the top 5 percent of black Americans was over \$200,000—lower than the mean for the top 5 percent of nonblack Americans, but higher than the inflation-adjusted mean for the top 5 percent of all Americans about a decade and a half earlier.¹⁴ In 1964, there were, by one count, only 300 black elected officials in America at all levels of government, yet by November 2011, there were estimated to be more than 10,500—including the president of the United States.¹⁵

Yes, Barack Obama’s accession to the White House was a great historical rite of passage for America. Yet whether or not we understand this, the very formulation that acclaims Obama as our “first black president” is itself a captive to our country’s historic race problem.

Obama is the child of a white Kansas mother and a Kenyan immigrant. In a different world, he might equally be hailed as a first-generation American president, or a president raised by grandparents. He has no common heritage with the tens of millions of Americans descended from slaves. If Barack Obama had been born to exactly the same parents, but in Brazil rather than the US, he could be regarded as white by that country's custom. It is only the long and inglorious reach of the "one-drop rule" in American thinking that prompts us to categorize him so very differently.

Yet the symbolism of Obama's election—and reelection—can hardly be ignored. His candidacy, much less his victory, would have been impossible in American politics in the world before 1964. A 1963 Gallup poll, for example, reported that less than half of American adults back then would even consider voting for a candidate for president if that person happened to be black.¹⁶ Obama won the White House in 2008 in large part because 45 percent of white voters that year chose him to be commander in chief. If the preceding Democratic candidate, John Kerry, had won as much of the white vote in 2004 as Obama did in 2008, he too would have been elected president.

The fabric of a country's civil society and its legal order are intimately enmeshed. The great political philosophers Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott remind us of the degree to which both legal norms and the legitimacy of particular laws depend on an underlying foundation of popular customs, mores, and habits of mind. Yet it is also true that it is sometimes possible for the state to effect a profound change in an open society's values, attitudes, and outlook by the enactment of certain new laws—and that such changes can sometimes be made to occur surprisingly swiftly.

The Great Society is a case in point, for its laws on civil rights have effected major transformations within our civil society. It is now all but impossible to find young people in America who would seriously defend or sympathize with the pre-1964 racialist policies and practices of many of their forebears. Vestiges of racialist behavior—or attitudes—from that inglorious tradition are not only unacceptable nowadays; indeed, they are commonly considered disgraceful, an occasion for disgust and shame.

America is arguably a much more decent place now than before the Great Society, thanks in no small part to the civil rights campaign that LBJ launched. His quest to end racial discrimination and racial inequality by harnessing the “engine of national power” to eradicate them may only count as a qualified success—but on the scales of history it weighs as an immense success nonetheless, warts and all.

III

This brings us to assessing the repercussions of the War on Poverty, the other major project championed under the Great Society. In LBJ’s original conception, the campaign against domestic poverty and the campaign for civil rights were utterly fused, since progress on either of these fronts was deemed to depend critically upon progress in the other. (The great majority of Americans living in poverty in 1964 were white—but material poverty then was so prevalent for black Americans that it could be said to define their common economic condition.)

The Great Society’s antipoverty plan was scarcely less ambitious than its vision for civil rights, or less consequential. It set the country on a path that would empower the central state to arrogate unprecedented resources in the name of uplifting living standards for the needy—and that would ultimately reshape the very rhythms of daily life in modern America. Unfortunately, the results of this initiative have been far more troubled, and the legacy far more clouded, than those of the Great Society’s crusade for civil rights.

The War on Poverty was grounded in a set of presumptions about our economy and society that were widely shared at the time by the country’s opinion leaders and decision-making elites. American prosperity was, in this postwar era, finally here to stay—and continuing economic advancement could be all but taken for granted. Indeed, the helmsmen of our national economy—groups like the President’s Council of Economic Advisers—knew so much about

how to manage the workings of the magnificent US macroeconomy that they could seriously talk about fine-tuning its performance.

The problem of poverty amid general affluence, for its part, was mainly a bold but technocratic question—to be answered through straightforward official redirection of national resources to fill the country’s “income gap.” Some special programs, however, were also required for addressing conditions in America’s pockets of lingering social disadvantage (urban slums, Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and other blighted locales). Guided by experts from the academy and elsewhere, these social programs could, with time, systematically convert virtually all of the underprivileged into full participants in the American Dream.

The conceit that possessed the initial troop of Great Society poverty warriors, in short, was that challenge inherent in the project of eliminating poverty in America was not in essence very different from that of the project for sending a man to the moon. In their view, both tasks could be successfully engineered by a confident government with sufficient resources, know-how, and commitment behind it. This outlook exemplifies what Friedrich Hayek termed “scientism,” pure and simple: misapplication of techniques and theories from the natural sciences to other, patently unsuitable realms.¹⁷

The scientific fallacies that animated the original War on Poverty did not long survive their encounters with real, live human beings, as the fates of the Office of Economic Opportunity and other experiments would attest. Nevertheless, official antipoverty programs and policies went on to flourish: at least, by the administrative metric of resource expenditures. In 2012 (the most recent year for which such figures are available from the Bureau of Economic Analysis), nearly \$700 billion in means-tested transfers of money, goods, and services were obtained by recipients of antipoverty benefits.¹⁸ And this does not include the bureaucratic overhead and personnel costs for such programs: with those, by the reckoning of Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield from the Heritage Foundation, the bill for antipoverty programs is increased by another several hundred billion dollars.¹⁹ At this writing, total government outlays

for US antipoverty programs may have reached, or even exceeded, the trillion-dollar mark.

And programs expressly devised for combating poverty were only one component within the overall schema of social policies intended to redress material want and economic insecurity. For the Great Society also added Medicare to the structure American welfare state and furthermore arguably prepared the way for more generous, and inventive, outlays from the existing Social Security program. All in all, inflation-adjusted government transfers for social welfare programs soared more than tenfold between 1964 and 2013, and real per capita welfare state transfers were six-plus times higher in 2013 than 50 years earlier. Numerous critics at home and abroad fault the contemporary US social welfare system for what they take to be its punitive austerity. Nevertheless, the share of overall personal income from social welfare transfers jumped from 5.8 percent in 1964 to 17.0 percent in 2013; more than one dollar in six within the overall American household budget now comes from government entitlement programs, redistributed through social welfare guarantees.²⁰

Since 1964, the US welfare state has devoted considerable resources to assuring or improving the public's living standards—something like \$20 trillion in inflation-adjusted dollars through antipoverty programs alone, by one calculation. What sort of effect have these programs had on deprivation and its attendant miseries?

If we were to judge the performance of our welfare state solely by the statistical measure invented to gauge national performance in the War on Poverty—the “poverty rate”—we would have to conclude the whole effort has been a miserable and unmitigated failure. The true picture, however, is rather more complex than that same poverty rate is capable of depicting, though not necessarily much more heartening.

IV

According to the official poverty rate, the proportion of our population below the poverty line was dropping rapidly in the years immediately before the War on Poverty was fully underway. In the seven years between 1959 and 1966, according to the Census Bureau, the proportion of our country living in poverty dropped by about a third, from 22.4 to 14.7 percent.²¹ Since then, however, the official poverty rate as reported has been essentially stuck. It reached an all-time low of 11.1 percent in 1973, in the Nixon era, then drifted uncertainly back upward. For the year 2012, the most recent such data available at this writing, the national poverty rate was 15 percent—slightly higher, in other words, than back in 1966, more than four and a half decades earlier.

The official poverty picture looks even worse the more closely one focuses on it. According to those same official numbers, the poverty rate for all families was no lower in 2012 than in 1966. The poverty rate for American children under 18 is higher now than it was then. The poverty rate for the working-age population (18–64) is also higher now than back then. The poverty rate for whites is higher now than it was then. Poverty rates for Hispanic Americans have been tracked only since 1972—but these likewise are higher today than back then. Shocking as this may sound, only a few groups within our society—most importantly, Americans 65 and older and African Americans of all ages—registered any appreciable improvement in poverty rates between 1966 and 2012.

If those official numbers reflected reality in America, all this would be cause for the gravest alarm. After all, the official poverty rate is meant to count the proportion of population living on incomes below an absolute threshold set back in the early 1960s and has been adjusted since then only to keep up with inflation. That threshold was meant to provide for a severe and stringent household budget—as stringency was envisioned half a century ago. But, of course, America is a vastly richer society today than at the onset of the War on Poverty. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis,

real per capita disposable income in our country in 2012 was two and a half times the 1966 level.²² And according to data compiled by the Federal Reserve, private wealth holdings grew even faster over that same period: by the Fed's estimates, real per capita net worth for households and nonprofit organizations was more than three times as high in 2012 as in 1966.²³

Taken together, these soundings would seem to conjure up the ghastly image of "immiserating growth," the fatal tendency of modern capitalist systems: at least, according to some postwar neo-Marxian theorists. But the proposition that a higher fraction of Americans are stuck in absolute poverty today than nearly half a century ago cannot be taken seriously. It is preposterous on its very face.

Consider that the health of Americans of all ages is markedly better now than then: life expectancy at birth rose by more than eight years between 1966 and 2010 alone and is higher at every age these days—even for centenarians.²⁴ Americans are not only healthier, but also much more educated—in 1966, nearly a third of adults 25 or older had a grade school education or less, compared to just 5 percent in 2013.²⁵ And Americans are more likely now to be working in paid jobs: despite the terrible 2008 economic crash, the percentage of employed adults 20 and older was still considerably higher in 2013 than in 1966 (61 percent versus 57 percent).²⁶

The idea that such a population would at the same time suffer a higher incidence of absolute poverty does not even pass the laugh-out-loud test. This picture is an illusion, a distorted reflection from the statistical variant of a funhouse mirror, and the funhouse mirror in question is the poverty rate itself. The poverty rate is a highly misleading measure of living standards and material deprivation—incurably misleading, in fact.

The central and irresolvable trouble with the official poverty rate is that it presumes an immediate and exact equivalence between income levels and consumption levels—so that any home in any year with a reported income level below the poverty line must perforce also be constrained to sub-poverty-line spending power. (There are many other flaws with the poverty rate as well—this one is simply the most grievous.) In our real-world America, by contrast, income

is a poor predictor of spending power for lower-income groups at any given point in time—and that predictive power has dramatically worsened over the course of our postwar era.

In the early 1960s (1960–61), according to the BLS Consumer Expenditure Survey, the bottom one-fourth of American homes spent about 12 percent more than their pretax reported incomes each year.²⁷ By 2011, according to that same survey, those in the lowest quintile were spending nearly 125 percent more than their reported pretax income and nearly 120 percent more than their reported posttax, posttransfer incomes.

This growing discrepancy between income and expenditures on the part of the poorer strata in recent decades is by no means impossible to explain. Not least important, households are subject to greater year-to-year earnings swings than in the past and have greater wherewithal (through borrowing, asset drawdowns, and other means) to buffer their consumption when they hit a bad year, or even a couple of bad years. But this phenomenon also means that people reporting ostensibly poverty-level incomes are less and less likely to be consigned to poverty-level living standards, as that standard was originally conceived in the early 1960s. Increasing noncash transfers of means-tested public benefits (including, especially, health care) only further accentuate the gap between reported income and actual consumption for America's "poverty population."

Thus, the actual living conditions of people counted as living "in poverty" in America today bear very little resemblance to those of Americans enumerated as poor in the first official government count attempted back in 1965. By 2011, for example, average per capita housing space for people in poverty was higher than the US average for 1980, and crowding (more than one person per room) was less common for the 2011 poor than for the nonpoor from 1970. More than three-quarters of the 2011 poor had access to one or more motor vehicles, whereas nearly three-fifths were without an auto in the early 1970s (1972–73). Refrigerators, dishwashers, washers and dryers, and many other appliances were more common in officially impoverished homes in 2011 than in the typical American home of 1980 or earlier. Microwaves were virtually universal in poor homes

in 2011, and DVDs, personal computers, and home Internet access are now typical in them—amenities not even the richest US households could avail themselves of at the start of the War on Poverty.²⁸ Further, Americans counted as poor today are manifestly healthier, better nourished (or even overnourished), and more schooled than their predecessors half a century ago.

To be clear: the poor in America today are not well to do. They are poorer than the rest of America. This has not changed. What has changed is their standard of living—which has risen markedly since the beginning of the War on Poverty, as have living standards for all the rest of us. Work by economists like Daniel Slesnick at the University of Texas, Bruce Meyer at the University of Chicago, and James X. Sullivan at the University of Notre Dame demonstrate that an ever-smaller share of our country subsists on *consumption levels* demarcated by our old, official, 1960s-era poverty line.²⁹

Consumption-focused assessments of the poverty problem are stunningly different from our official numbers. In a recent research paper, for example, Meyer and Sullivan indicate that such “consumption poverty” afflicted less than 4 percent of our total population in 2008. Their calculations suggest that “consumption poverty” might actually have been the fate of as little as 2.7 percent of the American population that year, depending on just how one measures price changes in the consumption basket. (Those numbers, incidentally, in principal include undocumented immigrants as well as native-born Americans, naturalized citizens, and green-card holders.) In the wake of the 2008 crash, “consumption poverty” rose—but as of 2010, when postcrash conditions were possibly most dire, just 3.7–4.5 percent of America was subject to it, according to these same estimates.³⁰

These studies underscore a very significant point, all too often misunderstood in both policy and intellectual circles today. Poverty in America—or more specifically, the sorts of material deprivation people knew back in the 1960s—has been all but eliminated in our country. This should not be a surprise, considering both the many intervening decades of general economic advancement, and the tremendous outlays of government antipoverty funds, currently averaging about \$9,000 in total expenses and \$7,000 in transfer value

per year for every person in our nation designated somehow as being in need.

We cannot say the War on Poverty was a *necessary* condition for the near-complete abolition of 1960-style poverty in our country today, insofar as we cannot know if progress against material want would have been slower without those efforts—or, alternatively, if progress would have been even more rapid. But we can say that the War on Poverty has proved to be a *sufficient* condition for achieving this great objective.

V

So the long War on Poverty has indeed managed to eradicate 1960s-style poverty from our midst, or very nearly so—even if our federal authorities today are not competent to describe this accomplishment (or seemingly, even recognize the accomplishment in the first place). This is an important fact in favor of the War on Poverty—but other important facts must be considered as well, all seemingly weighing on the other side of the ledger. For the institutionalization of antipoverty policy has been attended by the rise and spread of an ominous “tangle of pathologies” in the society whose ills antipoverty policies were intended to heal. Those pathologies appear to be conjoined with antipoverty policies; in some cases, antipoverty policies may create them, but irrespective of the causality at work, they are clearly very largely financed today by antipoverty policies.

The phrase “tangle of pathologies” harkens back to the famous Moynihan Report of 1965, which warned of the crisis of the family then gathering for black America.³¹ (The now-eminent author of that report, the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, was then assistant secretary of labor and went on to serve as a Democratic US senator from New York for nearly a quarter-century.) That report was criticized, even viciously denounced, by some at the time, but in retrospect much of it seems positively prophetic.

The Moynihan argument also assumed that the troubles impending for black America were unique—a consequence of the singular historical burdens that black Americans had endured in our country. That argument was not only plausible at the time, but also persuasive. Yet today that same “tangle of pathology” can no longer be described as characteristic of just one group within our country. Quite the contrary: for whatever reasons, these pathologies are evident throughout all of America today, regardless of race or ethnicity. Three of the most disturbing of these many entangled pathologies are welfare dependency, the flight from work, and family breakdown.

Welfare Dependency. Unlike, say, an old-age pension awarded on retirement after a lifetime of work, a bequest of charity or aid to the indigent is a transaction that establishes a relationship of dependence. As a people who have historically prized their independence, financial as well as political, dependence on “relief” and other handouts, whether informal or institutionalized, is a condition most Americans throughout history have attempted to avoid. Recovery from the Great Depression was corroborated by the great decline in the numbers of Americans on public aid: in 1951, the commissioner of Social Security was pleased to report that just 3.8 percent of Americans were receiving public aid, compared to 11.5 percent as recently as 1940.³² But with the War on Poverty and its successor programs, such dependency has become virtually the norm for modern America. The United States today is richer than at any previous juncture in its history—yet, paradoxically, more Americans than ever before are officially judged to be in need. Welfare dependence is at an all-time historical high and by all indications set to climb in the years ahead.

Perhaps tellingly, the US government did not get around to collecting data and publishing figures on the proportion of the population dependent on need-based benefits on a systematic basis until nearly two decades after the start of the War on Poverty, during the Reagan era. By then (1983), nearly one American in five (18.8 percent) lived in a home taking in one or more antipoverty (means-tested) benefits. By late 2011, according to one Census Bureau source, that proportion had risen above 35 percent—over one American in three.

By 2012, according to a different Census Bureau count, the proportion was slightly lower: 32.3 percent and “only” 29.4 percent if school lunches were excluded from the tally. But this still left more than 90 million Americans applying for and accepting aid from government antipoverty programs. But only 33 million people from America’s “poverty population” were enrolled in those same means-tested programs. In other words, nearly twice as many Americans above the poverty line as below it were getting antipoverty benefits. Evidently, the American welfare state has been defining dependence upward.

In the 1990s, a bipartisan political consensus enacted a “welfare reform” in America—but it would be misleading to overestimate the effect of that adjustment on the long-term rise in welfare dependency. That “welfare reform” was highly targeted and thus extremely limited in scope. It took aim at just one especially controversial and unpopular program: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a facet of the original Social Security legislation of the New Deal era, but one which had been allowed to mutate into a vehicle for financing unwed motherhood and intergenerational dependency.

AFDC’s reach was always limited—in 1983 only 4.2 percent of Americans lived in homes receiving aid from it, according to Census Bureau estimates—and that fraction has been pared down to just 2.0 percent in 2011. On the other hand, most of the other means-tested programs have extended their reach over those same years: public housing, income transfers from AFDC alternatives, food stamps, Medicaid, and still others. Since the advent of “welfare reform,” the proportion of the American population relying on at least some entitlement benefits from the government has jumped by another 10 percentage points.

By 2012, according to one Census Bureau count, significant demographic subgroups within the American population were well along the path to means-tested majorities—that is to say, toward the point where most members of the groups in question would be claiming benefits from government antipoverty programs, if they were not already doing so. More than 47 percent of all black Americans and fully 48 percent of Hispanic Americans of all ages were reckoned

to be taking home means-tested benefits (excluding school lunches from the tally, here and in the rest of this discussion). More than 60 percent of black and Hispanic children, and nearly 43 percent of all American children, were depending on antipoverty programs for at least some support. Dependency was less pronounced among children of Asian Americans and non-Hispanic whites (Anglos), but only to a degree—for both those groups, the ratio was close to 30 percent. In all of the aforementioned cases, most of the beneficiaries drawing on government poverty program resources were men, women, and children *not* officially counted as poor.

In affluent democracies, children are not expected to be self-supporting—nor, necessarily, are their mothers. For men in the prime of life, expectations are different. Thus, in a sense, the most revealing measure of the spread of dependence since the start of the War on Poverty is the declining financial independence of working-age American men. Among men 25 to 44 years of age, more than 25 percent lived in homes taking aid from antipoverty programs by 2012. For nonpoor men those same ages, the ratio was over 20 percent. While the proclivity was lower for working-age men living independently from families, nonetheless nearly 1 in 10 adult American men under 65 living by himself was seeking and accepting need-based public aid by 2012.

The reach of dependence is perhaps best highlighted by its inroads into the parts of American society traditionally least ensnared into it. Historically, Anglos have had the lowest dependence on public aid of any major racial or ethnic group delineated within official statistics—yet by 2012, nearly 1 in 5 nonpoor Anglo men ages 25–44, and about 1 in 11 under 65, nonpoor, and living alone, was on the government poverty benefit rolls.

The Flight from Work. Although a higher fraction of Americans 20 and older are working today than at the start of the War on Poverty (61.2 percent in January 2014 versus 57.2 percent in January 1964), and though labor force participation rates are likewise higher today than 50 years ago, these overall figures mask two distinct and very different tendencies.³³

On one hand, adult women are much more likely to be working or looking for work today than two generations ago. Labor force participation rates for women 20 and older are fully 20 percentage points higher today than in early 1964 (58.6 percent for January 2014 versus 38.5 percent for January 1964). A lifestyle that includes at least some paid employment has become the norm for American women over the past two generations.

On the other hand, men have been a diminishing presence within the workforce—and not only thanks to the rising share of women who seek to work. The proportion of men 20 and older who are employed has dramatically and almost steadily dropped since the start of the War on Poverty, falling from 80.6 percent in January 1964 to 67.6 percent 50 years later. No less remarkable: the proportion of adult men in the labor force—either working or looking for work—has likewise plunged over those same years, from 84.2 percent then to 72.1 percent today. Put another way: this means our country has seen a surge of men completely exiting the workforce over the past 50 years. Whereas fewer than 16 percent of men 20 or older neither had work nor were looking for it in early 1964, the corresponding share today is almost 28 percent.

In purely arithmetic terms, the main reason American men today are not working is not unemployment. Rather, it is because they have opted out of the labor market altogether. For every adult man in America who is between jobs and looking for new work, more than five are neither working nor looking for employment.

The decline in labor force participation rates for adult men can be partly attributed to population aging—a growing share of our society is over 65, or of traditional retirement age. Yet the role of population aging in this flight from work should not be exaggerated. In early 1964, just over 6 percent of civilian noninstitutionalized men aged 20–64 were entirely out of the workforce. By early 2014, the corresponding share had almost tripled, to more than 17 percent. In early 1964, for every man of these ages who was unemployed, roughly 1.6 were not looking for work at all. The unemployment rate is much worse today than it was back then. Even so, the ratio among working-age men of nonworkers to unemployed is more

than twice as high as 50 years ago, with well over three men *not* looking for work for each one who is looking.

Even in what should be the prime of work life, this male flight from work has been apparent. Between early 1964 and early 2014, the proportion of civilian, noninstitutionalized men completely out of the labor force nearly quadrupled—from 3.2 percent to 12.6 percent. By the same token, the corresponding share of non-workers for men 35–44 years of age more than tripled over those same years, from 2.5 percent in January 1964 to 9.0 percent in January 2014.

The withdrawal of progressively greater proportions of men—including relatively young men—from the US workforce seems especially paradoxical when we consider the major improvements in health conditions (as reflected in life expectancy improvements) and educational attainment (as reflected in mean years of schooling) for the cohorts under consideration over those same years. All other things being equal, one might have assumed these changes would make men *more* capable of working, not *less*.

It is curious, and noteworthy, that the male flight from work for prime working-age groups, striking as it has been, did not proceed uninterrupted over the entire postwar period. No, it took place only after the War on Poverty commenced. Between early 1948—when the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began the current system for tracking workforce data—and early 1964, a period stretching more than a decade and a half, the proportion of unworking men 25–54 years of age in America remained essentially unchanged. The same was true for men 35–44 years of age. For men 25–34, the labor force participation rate actually rose between 1948 and 1964 (96.1 percent in January 1948 vs. 97.1 percent in January 1964). It is tempting to observe that only since the War on Poverty began to offer alternatives to work for able-bodied men have we as a society have seen a major migration of men in prime working ages out of the time-established path of work.

As long as such data have routinely been collected, labor-force participation rates have been lowest for black Americans and highest for Hispanic Americans; rates for Asian Americans and Anglos

have been in between, close to the national average. There may be many reasons for the poor labor force performance of black American men—among them, lower educational levels, collapse of work opportunities in ghettos or urban centers, and possibly continuing variants of discrimination as well.

But ever since the War on Poverty, the flight from work among African American men has merely preceded the same flight for Anglos. Although the black American labor force participation rate for men of peak working ages (25–54) was sharply lower than that of Anglos for 2013, it had actually been a bit higher in 1973 than the Anglo rate would be 40 years later. The same is true for men in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. The strange and disturbing fact is that a lower share of Anglo men today are working or looking for work than was true for their African American counterparts four decades earlier—notwithstanding all the disadvantages borne by their black counterparts in those earlier years.

Family Breakdown. In the early postwar era, the norm for child-bearing and child rearing was the married two-parent household. Norm and reality were not identical, of course—but for the country as a whole, the gap was not immense. Illegitimacy was on the rise in the early postwar era, but as late as 1963, on the eve of the War on Poverty, more than 93 percent of American babies were reportedly coming into the world with two married parents.³⁴ According to the 1960 census, nearly 88 percent of children under 18 were then living with two parents.³⁵ That fraction was slightly higher than it had been before World War II, thanks in part to improving survival chances for parents and the correspondingly diminished risk of orphanhood.³⁶

Unfortunately, the rise of the new welfare policies inaugurated by the War on Poverty coincided with marked change in family formation patterns in America. Out-of-wedlock births exploded. Divorce and separation soared. The fraction of children living in two-parent homes commenced a continuing downward spiral. These new patterns are so pervasive, and so politically sensitive, that some today now object even to describing the phenomenon

as “family breakdown” in the first place. But the phenomenon has swept through all of American society over the past 50 years, leaving no ethnic group untouched.

Pre-Great Society statistics on birth outside marriage may understate the true extent of nonmarital child bearing, given the stigma that illegitimacy was widely judged to confer in those days. Be that as it may, for the quarter-century extending from 1940 to 1965, official data recorded a rise in fraction of births to unmarried women from 3.8 to 7.7 percent. Over the following quarter-century—1965 to 1990—out-of-wedlock births jumped from 7.7 percent of the nationwide total to 28.0 percent. Twenty-two years later (the most recent available data are for the year 2012), America’s overall out-of-wedlock birth ratio had surpassed 40 percent.³⁷

By 2013, nearly 32 percent of America’s children were living in arrangements other than a two-parent home. For older children (12–17 years of age), the odds against living in an intact two-parent home were greater still. In all nearly one child in four was living with just his or her mother, and another 7 percent was with a father, or a grandparent, or some other relative.³⁸

Moreover, given current trends in cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage, not all children living in two-parent homes nowadays are with both their biological parents—and even where they are, those biological parents are not always married. A Census Bureau study for 2009 reported just under 69 percent of America’s children lived in two-parent homes that year—but only 60 percent were biological offspring of both parents in their home, and only 57 percent were with both married biological parents. The corresponding percentages are presumably lower today.

The two-married-parent family construct was always frailest among African Americans of all major US population groups throughout the 20th century (though the reasons behind that fragility continue to be debated, sometimes rancorously). The reported illegitimacy ratio for nonwhites gradually rose from 17 percent in 1940 to 22 percent in 1959: the rate for African Americans by themselves would presumably have been a bit higher than that. In 1960, one in five nonwhite children was living with a lone mother. In 1969—the first year for

which such data are available for African Americans by themselves for both childbearing patterns and living arrangements for children—35 percent of black babies were born out of wedlock, and 30 percent of black children were living with a single mother. By 2012, more than 72 percent of black births were outside marriage, and in 2013 more than half of black children were living only with their mother—many more than the 37 percent who were in a two-parent home. Even smaller fractions of black children were living with both biological parents or with married biological parents (29 and 26 percent, respectively, for 2009—and likely lower today).

But out-of-wedlock birth ratios and living arrangements for children have been changing in the rest of America as well since the start of the War on Poverty—and radically. Among Hispanic Americans, more than 30 percent of children were in single-parent homes by 2013—and well over half were born out of marriage by 2012. By 2009, fewer than 60 percent of Latino children were living with both biological parents, and fewer than 55 percent lived with biological parents who were married. Corresponding data are not available for 1964, but these figures are much higher than for 1980 (when 21 percent were in single-parent homes and fewer than 25 percent were born out of marriage).

The collapse of the traditional family structure has been underway among the majority population of Anglos as well. For this population, there were few signs of impending family breakdown in the generation before the War on Poverty; between 1940 and 1963, the out-of-wedlock birth ratio increased, but only from 2 percent to 3 percent, and in 1960, just 6 percent of white children lived with single mothers. As of 2012, the proportion of out-of-wedlock births was 29 percent—nearly 10 times as high as it was just before the War on Poverty. As of 2013, more than 18 percent of Anglo children were in single-mother homes—three times the proportion before the War on Poverty—and more than one-quarter live outside two-parent homes. By 2009, less than two-thirds of Anglo children were living with both biological parents, and fewer than five out of eight were with biological parents who were married to each other. Thus, Anglo whites today register illegitimacy ratios markedly higher than

the ratios for African Americans when Moynihan called attention to the crisis in the black family—and proportions of single-parent children are eerily comparable.

The reason the Moynihan Report sounded an alarm about family trends for black America was that a very large body of research already existed back in the 1960s concerning the manifold disadvantages conferred on children who grew up in what were then called “broken homes.” Over the intervening decades, a small library of additional studies have accumulated to corroborate and document the whole tragic range of disadvantages that such children face.³⁹ (This is not to say that children from alternative living arrangements cannot end up thriving—obviously, many do; it is, rather, that their odds of suffering adverse educational, health, behavioral, psychological, and other outcomes are much higher.) These disadvantages are starkly evident even after controlling for such important factors as socioeconomic status or ethnicity and race.

One of the many risks children of broken homes confront is a much higher chance of becoming a violent offender in our criminal justice system—and more broadly, a much higher risk of being arrested for crime. Since the launch of the War on Poverty, criminality in America has taken an unprecedented upward turn within our nation. Although reported rates of crime victimization—including murder and other violent crimes—have been falling for two decades, the percentage of Americans behind bars continued to rise (though those proportions appear to have peaked—or temporarily paused—since 2009).

As of year-end 2010, more than 5 percent of all black men in their 40s and nearly 7 percent of those in their 30s were living in state or federal prisons, with additional numbers incarcerated in local jails awaiting trial or sentencing.⁴⁰ For Latinos, the corresponding numbers were more than 2 percent and nearly 3 percent. Among Anglos, slightly more than 1 percent of all men in their 30s were sentenced offenders in state or federal prisons—a lower share than for these others, but a higher proportion than in earlier generations. This huge convict population may be described in many different ways—but one way to describe most of them is as children of the earthquake

that shook family structure in America in the era of expansive anti-poverty policies.

Surveying this new American landscape of dependency, voluntary male joblessness, and family decay, an unavoidable question confronts our society: how are these perverse features of our daily life related to the rise of the modern American welfare state? Is it simply a coincidence that welfare dependence, the male flight from work, and accelerated family breakdown all happened to coincide with the sustained domestic policy shift heralded by the War on Poverty? As philosophers and statisticians are careful to caution, conjuncture does not establish causation. But this broad and important conjuncture is surely thought provoking and invites both deep reflection and careful examination.

With respect to welfare dependency, cause and effect are least open to debate. In this particular instance, supply has seemingly created its own demand. Much greater proportions of Americans below the poverty line are seeking and accepting means-tested benefits today than in the past, irrespective of ethnicity or family structure. The culture has changed—or has been changed—by the availability of public benefits that can be obtained by, so to speak, pleading poverty. Moreover, a progressively greater share of Americans above the poverty line is becoming accustomed to applying for and obtaining money, resources, or services from government antipoverty programs. The stigma of depending on what used to be called “relief” is no longer as acute and widespread as it was before the War on Poverty: to which many might say, rightly so, “entitlements” are benefits to which all citizens are in principle legally entitled. But the plain fact in any case is that popular mores concerning the propriety of taking government help for the needy have shifted tremendously over the past 50 years.

Causality is much less clear-cut when it comes to the adult male flight from work and the erosion of the married two-parent family norm. In these two cases, it could be that the new welfare state was simply stepping into a void opened by social trends propelled by other, unrelated factors: among these, an increasing social preference for leisure that decreased tolerance for the inconveniences demanded

by child rearing and long-term familial commitments and changes in technology (including birth control technology). Nor is the fracturing of the modern family unique to postwar America. Far from it: as the public intellectual Francis Fukuyama, among others, has pointed out, almost every Western industrial democracy has undergone a similar sort of earthquake within the family since the 1960s.⁴¹ Only one of those societies was also witness to the War on Poverty: ours.

For these and other reasons, the Great Society's role in modern America's social pathologies seems fated for endless and inconclusive debate. What is indisputable, however, is that the new American welfare state facilitated these new American trends by helping to finance them: by providing support for working-age men who are no longer seeking employment and for single women with children who would not be able to maintain independent households without government aid. Regardless of the origins of the flight from work and family breakdown, the War on Poverty and successive welfare policies have made each of these modern tendencies more feasible as mass phenomena in our country today.

Suffice it to say that none of these troubling mass phenomena were envisioned when the War on Poverty commenced. Just the opposite—President Johnson saw the War on Poverty as a campaign to bring dependency on government handouts to an eventual end, not a means of perpetuating them for generations to come. He made this very clear three months after his Great Society speech at the signing ceremony for some of his initial War on Poverty legislation, when he announced:

We are not content to accept the endless growth of relief rolls or welfare rolls. . . . Our American answer to poverty is not to make the poor more secure in their poverty but to reach down and to help them lift themselves out of the ruts of poverty and move with the large majority along the high road of hope and prosperity. The days of the dole in our country are numbered.⁴²

Held against this ideal, the actual unfolding of America's domestic antipoverty policies can be seen only as a tragic failure. Dependence

on government relief, in its many modern versions, is more widespread today, and possibly also more habitual, than at any time in our history. To make matters much worse, such aid has become integral to financing lifestyles and behavioral patterns plainly destructive to our commonwealth—and on a scale far more vast than could have been imagined in an era before such antipoverty aid was all but unconditionally available.

VI

With his Great Society speech, LBJ basically set the goals for the journey our country has been pursuing for half a century. We are not yet in the land his speech prophesied, but we would do well to take measure of the place where two generations of sustained governmental efforts to eliminate racial discrimination and material poverty have, thus far, delivered us.

America has two great achievements to celebrate and take pride in from this Great Society agenda. It has finally, and decisively, brought an end to the long, hateful stain of legalized racial discrimination within our nation. And it has all but eliminated of the sort of material deprivation that tens of millions of Americans in the early 1960s still suffered. Judged against a standard that insists upon perfection, as is at times our impulse, these achievements of course fall short. There is room for improvement in race relations, to say the least. Tens of millions of Americans still regard themselves as poor today, albeit by a rather different conception of poverty than in the past.

But if politics is the art of the possible, we should recognize these great achievements for what they are. Neither of these achievements, we must also recognize, could have been consummated without a much bigger government—and much greater government intrusion—than America had known in all earlier times.

The unintended consequences of this deployment of state power and resources were also extraordinary—and extraordinarily adverse.

For the rise of the modern American welfare state has left a trail of social wreckage in its wake.

This terrible incongruity is most apparent for the African American population in the US. At long last relieved from the institutionalized restrictions that had prevented them from seizing opportunities afforded all others, many African Americans have prospered and succeeded in modern America as never before. Yet in the same era that civil rights progress opened up so many new vistas, African Americans on the whole also found themselves more dependent on government welfare, with their men more likely to be entirely out of the workforce and their children much more likely to grow up without two parents at home.

Those same destructive trends—welfare dependency, male worklessness, and family decay—have come to characterize an ever-growing proportion of America's nonblack population. To repeat what I have already noted: *all* ethnic groups in America have become increasingly subject to these trends—social problems that were, not so long ago, commonly held to be distinctive to African Americans *alone*. All these social problems now appear to be at least as pronounced for non-Hispanic white Americans as they were in the African American community back when the Moynihan Report declared a crisis for America's blacks.

In that earlier time, the Moynihan Report hypothesized that welfare dependence, male worklessness, and family fragility were the special affliction of black Americans because of the special misfortunes of slavery and racism they endured for so many generations. Whatever else may be said of this hypothesis today, it can hardly propose to explain what has unfolded in modern America for other nonblack minorities over the past two generations—much less for our white majority.

The Great Society was a project that ended up at war with itself. Modern America has been shaped by the irreconcilable contradiction between its vision of human flourishing, on the one hand, and the particulars of the antipoverty programs that the Johnson administration and subsequent administrations promoted and financed, on the other. The former promised at long last to include all Americans,

irrespective of race, as full citizens under the embrace of the exceptional legal and economic arrangements afforded through the American political tradition. The latter subverted that same promise by tacitly encouraging, and overtly subsidizing, an alternative to financial self-reliance, work, and intact family: the very social basis upon which the American experiment was built.

Thus, so many of the curious and bittersweet paradoxes that define everyday life in our country today: more equality and opportunity—but possibly also more hopelessness; less poverty—but more misery; more prosperity—but also more pauperism. As we look back on the legacy of the Great Society, Americans must challenge themselves to understand this epoch for both its triumph and its tragedy.

Notes

1. Lyndon Baines Johnson, “State of the Union” (speech, Washington, DC, January 8, 1964).

2. Lyndon Baines Johnson, “Remarks at the University of Michigan” (commencement address, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 22, 1964).

3. Barack Obama, “A More Perfect Union” (speech, Constitution Center, Philadelphia, PA, May 18, 2008).

4. Lest we forget: in the early 1960s the Republicans were still regarded by much of America as the party of civil rights. In the 1960, Richard Nixon is thought to have garnered about a third of the black vote. Practically all of the elected officials in Jim Crow regions of America were Democrats. And it was on the basis of overwhelming Republican support in 1964 that a southern Democratic filibuster against the pending Civil Rights Bill was prevented in the Senate, assuring the passage of the bill into law. In sum: influential as he may have been within his party, Goldwater’s views on the civil rights question were representative neither of his party’s leadership nor its rank and file.

5. Barry Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepherdsville, KY: Victor Publishing Co., 1960).

6. In contemplating that last question, we may wish to ponder these words from Burke Marshall in 1964: “It is necessary to be realistic about the limits on the power of the federal government to eliminate racial discrimination by simple law enforcement.” [*Federalism and Civil Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 3] Marshall was not a Goldwater Republican: he was assistant attorney general for civil rights under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and an instrumental figure in the crafting and passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The caution in his assessment may suggest how very modest were the expectations of constitutionally versed civil rights proponents for federal redress of racial injustices before the great changes of the Great Society era.

7. Gallup Politics, “As in 1963, Blacks Still Feel Disadvantaged in Getting Jobs,” August 28, 2013, www.gallup.com/poll/164153/1963-blacks-feel-disadvantaged-getting-jobs.aspx.

8. Brian Gratton and Myron Gutmann, *Historical Statistics of the United*

States: Millennial Edition 1, 1st ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-177–1-179.

9. US Census Bureau, American FactFinder, “American Community Survey,” http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_11_5YR_B16005B&prodType=table.

10. Nicholas A. Jones and Jungmiwha Bullock, *The Two or More Races Population: 2010* (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, September 2012), www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-13.pdf.

11. Edward Glaeser and Jacob Vigdor, *The End of the Segregated: Racial Separation in America’s Neighborhoods, 1890-2010* (New York: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, January 2012), www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_66.htm#07.

12. US Census Bureau, “Educational Attainment in the United States: 2013—Detailed Tables,” www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2013/tables.html.

13. US Census Bureau, “CPS Historical Time Series Tables,” www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/historical/index.html.

14. US Census Bureau, “Historical Income Tables: Income Inequality,” www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/inequality.

15. Wade Henderson, “The Voting Rights Act of 1965: 40 Years after ‘Bloody Sunday,’ a Promise Still Unfulfilled,” Leadership Conference, March 2, 2005, www.civilrights.org/voting-rights/vra/2006/the-voting-rights-act-of-1965-40-years-after-bloody-sunday-a-promise-still-unfulfilled.html; and “National Roster of Black elected Officials,” Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, fact sheet, www.jointcenter.org/sites/default/files/upload/research/files/National%20Roster%20of%20Black%20Elected%20Officials%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf.

16. David W. Moore, “Little Prejudice against a Woman, Jewish, Black or Catholic Presidential Candidate,” Gallup News, June 10, 2003, www.gallup.com/poll/8611/little-prejudice-against-woman-jewish-black-catholic-presidenti.aspx.

17. Friedrich A. von Hayek, “Scientism and the Study of Society,” *Economica* 9, no. 35 (August 1942): 267–91.

18. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Regional Data: GDP and Personal Income Data—SA 35 Personal Current Transfer Receipts,” www.bea.gov/iTable/iTableHtml.cfm?reqid=70&step=30&isuri=1&7028=-1&7040

--1&7083=Levels&7031=0&7022=7&7023=0&7024=Non-Industry&7025=0&7026=00000&7027=-1&7001=47&7029=7&7090=70&7033=-1.

19. Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, "Welfare Is at an All-Time High," National Review Online, October 22, 2012, www.nationalreview.com/articles/331111/welfare-all-time-high-robert-rector.

20. Derived from Bureau of Economic Analysis, "National Data: National Income and Product Accounts—Table 2.1: Personal Income and Its Disposition," www.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?ReqID=9&step=1#reqid=9&step=3&isuri=1&910=x&911=0&903=58&904=1964&905=2013&906=a.

21. US Census Bureau, "Historical Poverty Tables—People, Table 2," www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html.

22. Derived from Bureau of Economic Analysis, "National Income: National Income and Product Account Tables, Table 2.1. Personal Income and Its Disposition."

23. Derived from three Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Economic Data indicators: "Total Population: All Ages, Including Armed Forces Overseas," <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/POP>; "Personal Consumption Expenditures (Implicit Price Deflator)," <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/DPCERD3Q086SBEA>; and "Households and Nonprofit Organizations, Net Worth, Level," <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/HNONWRQ027S>.

24. Human Mortality Database, "The United States of America, Life Tables (period 1x1), Total," last modified June 24, 2013, www.mortality.org/hmd/USA/STATS/bltper_1x1.txt.

25. US Census Bureau, "CPS Historical Time Series Tables, Table A-1," www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/historical/.

26. US Census Bureau, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," <http://data.bls.gov/pdq/querytool.jsp?survey=ln>.

27. Nicholas Eberstadt, *The Poverty of the Poverty Rate: Measure and Mismeasure of Material Deprivation in Modern America* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, September 30, 2008).

28. Ibid.; and US Bureau of the Census, *American Housing Survey for the United States: 2011*, September 2013, www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/programs-surveys/ahs/data/2011/h150-11.pdf.

29. See, for example, Daniel T. Slesnick, "Gaining Ground: Poverty in

the Postwar United States,” *Journal of Political Economy* 101, no. 1 (February 1993): 1–38; Daniel T. Slesnick, *Consumption and Social Welfare: Living Standards and Their Distribution in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Bruce D. Meyer and James X. Sullivan, “The Material Well-Being of the Poor and the Middle Class Since 1980” (working paper, AEI, Washington, DC, 2011), www.aei.org/files/2011/10/25/Material-Well-Being-Poor-Middle-Class.pdf; Bruce D. Meyer and James X. Sullivan, “Five Decades of Consumption and Income Poverty” (working paper no. 2010-003, MFI, 2009), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1535524; and Bruce D. Meyer and James X. Sullivan, “Winning the War: Poverty from the Great Society to the Great Recession,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (Fall 2012): 133–183, www.brookings.edu/~media/Projects/BPEA/Fall%202012/2012b_Meyer.pdf?_lang=en.

30. Meyer and Sullivan, “Winning the War: Poverty from the Great Society to the Great Recession.”

31. Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, 1965), www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/webid-meynihan.htm. In Moynihan’s words:

It may not be supposed that the Negro American community has not paid a fearful price for the incredible mistreatment to which it has been subjected over the past three centuries. . . . American slavery was profoundly different from, and in its lasting effects on individuals and their children, indescribably worse than, any recorded servitude, ancient or modern. . . . It is [difficult] for whites to perceive the effect that three centuries of exploitation have had on the fabric of Negro society itself. Here the consequences of the historic injustices done to Negro Americans are silent and hidden from view. But here is where the true injury has occurred. . . . *There is a considerable body of evidence to support the conclusion that Negro social structure, in particular the Negro family, battered and harassed by discrimination, injustice, and uprooting, is in the deepest trouble.* [emphasis in the original]

32. Arthur J. Altmeyer, “Social Welfare Today,” *Social Security Bulletin* 15, no. 4 (April 1952), www.ssa.gov/history/aja452.html.

33. All US labor force data in this section are drawn or derived from US Census Bureau, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey.”

34. Stephanie Ventura and Christine Bachrach, "Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940–99," *National Vital Statistics Reports* 48, no. 16 (October 2000), www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr48/nvs48_16.pdf.

35. US Census Bureau, "Families and Living Arrangements—Table CH-1: Living Arrangements of Children under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present," www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/children.html.

36. Rose M. Kreider and Renee Ellis, "Living Arrangements of Children: 2009," US Census Bureau Current Population Reports, June 2011, figure 1, www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-126.pdf.

37. Brady E. Hamilton et al., "Births: Preliminary Data for 2012," *National Vital Statistics Reports* 62, no. 3 (September 2013), www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr62/nvsr62_03.pdf.

38. US Census Bureau, "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2013: Children—Household Relationship and Family Status of Children under 18 years, by Age and Sex: 2013 (table C1)," www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013C.html.

39. James Q. Wilson, *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2003).

40. Paul Guerino, Paige M. Harrison, and William J. Sabol, "Prisoners in 2010," US Department of Justice bulletin, December 2011, appendix table 15, www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p10.pdf.

41. Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstituting of Social Order* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

42. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks upon Signing the Economic Opportunity Act" (speech, White House, August 20, 1964), www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26452.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to Christopher DeMuth, Robert Doar, and Mary Eberstadt for their incisive suggestions and constructive criticisms. Thanks are also due Alex Coblin for his able research assistance. Finally, but not least, I wish to thank Richard Reinsch for originally suggesting I explore this topic. The usual caveats apply.

About the Author

Nicholas Eberstadt is the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at AEI. He is also a senior adviser to the National Bureau of Asian Research. He researches and writes extensively on demographics, economic development, and international security. He is the author of numerous monographs and books, most recently *A Nation of Takers: America's Entitlement Epidemic* (Templeton Press, 2012).

Board of Trustees

Tully M. Friedman, *Chairman*
Chairman and CEO
Friedman Fleischer & Lowe, LLC

Daniel A. D'Aniello,
Vice Chairman
Chairman and Co-Founder
The Carlyle Group

Clifford S. Asness
Managing and Founding Principal
AQR Capital Management

Gordon M. Binder
Managing Director
Coastview Capital, LLC

Arthur C. Brooks
President and Beth and Ravenel
Curry Chair in Free Enterprise
American Enterprise Institute

The Honorable
Richard B. Cheney

Peter H. Coors
Vice Chairman of the Board
Molson Coors Brewing Company

Harlan Crow
Chairman and CEO
Crow Holdings

Ravenel B. Curry III
Chief Investment Officer
Eagle Capital Management, LLC

John V. Faraci
Chairman and CEO
International Paper Company

Christopher B. Galvin
Chairman
Harrison Street Capital, LLC

Raymond V. Gilmartin
Harvard Business School

Harvey Golub
Chairman and CEO, Retired
American Express Company
Chairman, Miller Buckfire

Robert F. Greenhill
Founder and Chairman
Greenhill & Co., Inc.

Frank J. Hanna
Hanna Capital, LLC

Seth A. Klarman
President and CEO
The Baupost Group, LLC

Bruce Kovner
Chairman
Caxton Alternative Management, LP

Marc S. Lipschultz
Partner
Kohlberg Kravis Roberts

John A. Luke Jr.
Chairman and CEO
MeadWestvaco Corporation

George L. Priest
Yale Law School

Kevin B. Rollins
Senior Advisor
TPG Capital

Matthew K. Rose
Chairman and CEO
BNSF Railway Company

The American Enterprise Institute

Founded in 1943, AEI is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and educational organization based in Washington, DC. The Institute sponsors research, conducts seminars and conferences, and publishes books and periodicals.

AEI's research is carried out under three major programs: Economic Policy Studies, Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, and Social and Political Studies. The resident scholars and fellows listed in these pages are part of a network that also includes adjunct scholars at leading universities throughout the United States and in several foreign countries.

The views expressed in AEI publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, advisory panels, officers, or trustees.

Edward B. Rust Jr.
Chairman and CEO
State Farm Insurance Companies

D. Gideon Searle
Managing Partner
The Serafin Group, LLC

Mel Sembler
Founder and Chairman
The Sembler Company

Wilson H. Taylor
Chairman Emeritus
Cigna Corporation

William H. Walton
Managing Member
Rockpoint Group, LLC

Marilyn Ware
Chairman, Retired
American Water Works

Emeritus Trustees

Richard B. Madden

Robert H. Malott

Paul F. Oreffice

Henry Wendt

Officers

Arthur C. Brooks
President and Beth and Ravenel
Curry Chair in Free Enterprise

David Gerson
Executive Vice President

Jason Bertsch
Vice President, Development

Danielle Pletka
Vice President, Foreign and
Defense Policy Studies

Council of Academic Advisers

George L. Priest, *Chairman*
Edward J. Phelps Professor of Law
and Economics
Yale Law School

Alan J. Auerbach
Robert D. Burch Professor of
Economics and Law
University of California, Berkeley

Eliot A. Cohen
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced
International Studies
Johns Hopkins University

Eugene F. Fama
Robert R. McCormick Distinguished
Service Professor of Finance
Booth School of Business
University of Chicago

Martin Feldstein
George F. Baker Professor
of Economics
Harvard University

Aaron L. Friedberg
Professor of Politics and
International Affairs
Princeton University

Robert P. George
McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence
Director, James Madison Program
in American Ideals and Institutions
Princeton University

Eric A. Hanushek
Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow
Hoover Institution
Stanford University

R. Glenn Hubbard
Dean and Russell L. Carson Professor
of Finance and Economics
Columbia Business School

Walter Russell Mead
James Clarke Chace Professor of
Foreign Affairs and the Humanities
Bard College

John L. Palmer
University Professor and
Dean Emeritus
Maxwell School of Citizenship
and Public Affairs
Syracuse University

Mark Pauly
Bendheim Professor, Professor of
Health Care Management
Wharton School at the University of
Pennsylvania

Sam Peltzman
Ralph and Dorothy Keller
Distinguished Service Professor
of Economics
Booth School of Business
University of Chicago

Jeremy A. Rabkin
Professor of Law
George Mason University
School of Law

Harvey S. Rosen
John L. Weinberg Professor of
Economics and Business Policy
Princeton University

Richard J. Zeckhauser
Frank Plumpton Ramsey Professor
of Political Economy
Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

Research Staff**Ariel Adesnik**

Visiting Fellow

Joseph AntosWilson H. Taylor Scholar in Health
Care and Retirement Policy**Leon Aron**Resident Scholar; Director,
Russian Studies**Michael Auslin**

Resident Scholar

Claude Barfield

Resident Scholar

Michael Barone

Resident Fellow

Roger Bate

Visiting Scholar

Richard Bennett

Visiting Fellow

Walter Berns

Resident Scholar, Emeritus

Andrew G. Biggs

Resident Scholar

Edward Blum

Visiting Fellow

Dan Blumenthal

Resident Fellow

John R. Bolton

Senior Fellow

Karlyn Bowman

Senior Fellow

Alex Brill

Research Fellow

James C. Capretta

Visiting Scholar

Timothy P. Carney

Visiting Fellow

Lynne V. Cheney

Senior Fellow

Edward Conard

Visiting Scholar

Sadanand Dhume

Resident Fellow

Robert Doar

Morgridge Fellow in Poverty Studies

Thomas DonnellyResident Fellow; Co-Director,
Marilyn Ware Center for
Security Studies**Mackenzie Eaglen**

Resident Fellow

Nicholas EberstadtHenry Wendt Scholar in
Political Economy**Jeffrey Eisenach**Visiting Scholar
Director, Center for Internet,
Communications, and
Technology Policy**Jon Entine**

Visiting Fellow

R. Richard Geddes

Visiting Scholar

James K. Glassman

Visiting Fellow

Jonah Goldberg

Fellow

Aspen Gorry

Research Fellow

Scott Gottlieb, MD

Resident Fellow

Phil Gramm

Visiting Scholar

William C. Greenwalt

Visiting Fellow

Michael S. Greve

Visiting Scholar

Kevin A. HassettJohn G. Searle Senior Fellow and
Director of Economic Policy Studies**Robert B. Helms**

Resident Scholar

Frederick M. HessResident Scholar; Director,
Education Policy Studies**Ayaan Hirsi Ali**

Visiting Fellow

R. Glenn Hubbard

Visiting Scholar

Frederick W. KaganResident Scholar; Director, AEI
Critical Threats Project; and
Christopher DeMuth Chair**Leon R. Kass, MD**

Madden-Jewett Chair

Andrew P. KellyResident Scholar; Director of the
Center on Higher Education Reform**Paul H. Kupiec**

Resident Scholar

Jon Kyl

Visiting Fellow

Desmond Lachman

Resident Fellow

Adam Lerrick

Visiting Scholar

Phillip Lohaus

Research Fellow

John H. Makin

Resident Scholar

Aparna Mathur

Resident Scholar, Jacobs Associate

Michael Mazza

Research Fellow

J. Matthew McInnis

Resident Fellow

Michael Q. McShane

Research Fellow

Thomas P. Miller

Resident Fellow

Charles Murray

W. H. Brady Scholar

Roger F. Noriega

Fellow

Stephen D. Oliner

Resident Scholar

Norman J. Ornstein

Resident Scholar

Pia Orrenius

Visiting Scholar

Richard Perle

Fellow

Mark J. Perry

Scholar

James Pethokoukis

DeWitt Wallace Fellow

Tomas J. Philipson

Visiting Scholar

Edward Pinto

Resident Fellow

Alex J. Pollock

Resident Fellow

Ramesh Ponnuru

Visiting Fellow

Vincent R. Reinhart

Visiting Scholar

Awilda Rodriguez

Research Fellow

Richard Rogerson

Visiting Scholar

Michael Rubin

Resident Scholar

Sally Satel, MD

Resident Scholar

Gary J. SchmittResident Scholar; Director,
Program on American Citizenship;
Co-Director, Marilyn Ware Center
for Security Studies**Mark Schneider**

Visiting Scholar

David Schoenbrod

Visiting Scholar

Derek Scissors

Resident Scholar

Sita Nataraj Slavov

Resident Scholar

Vincent Smith

Visiting Scholar

Christina Hoff SommersResident Scholar; Director,
W. H. Brady Program**Michael R. Strain**

Research Fellow

Phillip Swagel

Visiting Scholar

Marc A. Thiessen

Fellow

Stan A. Veuger

Research Fellow

Alan D. Viard

Resident Scholar

Peter J. WallisonArthur F. Burns Fellow in
Financial Policy Studies**William B. Wilcox**

Visiting Scholar

Paul Wolfowitz

Scholar

John Yoo

Visiting Scholar

Benjamin Zycher

Resident Scholar

ABOUT AEI

The American Enterprise Institute is a community of scholars and supporters committed to expanding liberty, increasing individual opportunity, and strengthening free enterprise. AEI pursues these unchanging ideals through independent thinking, open debate, reasoned argument, and the highest standards of fact-based research. Without regard for politics or prevailing fashion, we dedicate our work to a more prosperous, safer, and more democratic nation and world.

The Great Society at Fifty: The Triumph and the Tragedy is part of an occasional AEI series on critical policy issues. Other titles include:

- *The Future of Conservatism*
- *Stepping Up, Down, or Back?: Rethinking American Leadership in the 21st Century*
- *Opportunity for All: How to Think about Income Inequality*



American Enterprise Institute
1150 Seventeenth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036
202.862.5800
www.aei.org