How the Great Society "destroyed the American family"

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What we are seeing in the inner city is essentially the grim harvest of the Great Society ... because we are seeing the breakdown of the family structure, largely contributed to by welfare policies.... We now have a situation in the inner cities where 64 percent of the children are illegitimate, and there's a very small wonder that we have trouble instilling values in educating children when they have their home life so disrupted.

—Attorney General William P. Barr, appearing on "This Week with David Brinkley," April 26, 1992.

THIS ELECTION YEAR will be the first in American history in which the issue of welfare dependency has been raised to the level of presidential politics. Not, that is, the issue of persons who are out of work, but rather of persons who, typically, are not in the work force. At the outset of the year

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there were 4,719,000 AFDC cases with a total of thirteen million recipients. By contrast, in January there were some eight million persons unemployed.

President George Bush set the pattern in the following passage of his January 1992 State of the Union address:

Ask American parents what they dislike about how things are in our country, and chances are good that pretty soon they'll get to welfare.

Americans are the most generous people on earth. But we have to go back to the insight of Franklin Roosevelt who, when he spoke of what became the welfare program, warned that it must not become "a narcotic" and a "subtle destroyer" of the spirit.

Welfare was never meant to be a lifestyle; it was never meant to be a habit; it was never supposed to be passed from generation to generation like a legacy.

It's time to replace the assumptions of the welfare state, and help reform the welfare system.

As we later learned, out in Arlington Heights, Illinois, White House strategists assembled a focus group with hand-held Perception Analyzers, each with a dial hooked up to a computer. Viewers were told to turn up to 100 or down to 0 as they approved or disapproved parts of the speech.

The address wasn't that much of a hit. The declaration that "The Cold War didn't end. It was won," left the focus group, well, cold. There were, however, two big scores. "This government is too big and spends too much" came in at 94. "Welfare was never meant to be a lifestyle ... passed from generation to generation like a legacy" hit 91. Had the President declared, "This government is too big and spends too much on welfare," the Perception Analyzers might have gone into meltdown.

The President took up the theme of welfare reform with yet greater insistency in a Rose Garden press conference on April 10. He announced that he was granting a waiver to the state of Wisconsin to cut benefits to welfare mothers who had a second or third child, which the Congressional Budget Office estimates would come to a third of all AFDC children nationwide.

Whilst all this was taking place, various Democratic candidates were setting forth welfare proposals, notably Governor Bill Clinton, who led the alliance of governors that helped conceive the Family Support Act of 1988. Not to be overlooked, H. Ross Perot ended a question-and-answer session at the National Press Club with an analogy to the fate of the American Indians. "Nothing ever
stopped them,” he said, “until we put him on the reservation.” Then this: “Don’t ever put anybody on the reservation again. Our current welfare system puts people on the reservation.”

All this was associated with a long recession in which welfare dependency rose markedly. The week following Mr. Bush’s press conference, U.S. News & World Report published a thoughtful article on the subject by David Whitman entitled “War on Welfare Dependency.” Cutting back was one theme:

As public resentment toward welfare crests, presidential candidates and other politicians have started pressing for benefit cutbacks that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.... All told, 31 states froze AFDC benefits last year—and nine more actually trimmed benefits for some or all families. Next year, financially stressed states will likely seek more cutbacks.

There was also a second theme:

In practical terms, those numbers amount to a kind of social crisis: One in 7 American children is now on relief and roughly 2,000 more are joining the rolls every day.

That same week the New York Times Book Review carried a notice of two books on this same subject, Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty, and the Underclass by Christopher Jencks, and The New Politics of Poverty, The Nonworking Poor in America by Lawrence M. Mead. Both books speak of a crisis. The reviewer, Dennis H. Wrong, notes that one of these describes it as “an American crisis comparable to the Civil War, even as a threat to the basic values of Western civilization.”

A crisis foretold

As it happens, this is precisely the crisis I forecast in a policy planning paper written in the U.S. Department of Labor just twenty-seven years earlier. This paper, sent to the President, began with a one-sentence paragraph:

The United States is approaching a new crisis in race relations.

The crisis would be associated with the social structure of inner-city black communities. This was in March 1965. In September of that year, in the Jesuit journal, America, I put the proposition more graphically:
From the wild Irish slums of the nineteenth-century Eastern seaboard, to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American history: a community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder ... that is not only to be expected; it is very near to inevitable. And it is richly deserved.

Let me set forth the simple background of the report, entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." I was then Assistant Secretary of Labor for Policy Planning and Research. This was a new position; part of the style of government in the New Frontier. I had a small but exceptionally able planning staff, some half dozen persons in all. I also had a nominal supervisory relationship to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In 1963, we had set about trying to develop correlations between unemployment data of various sorts and other indicators of social disorder. We began to find strong correlations between "manpower" data (as we would have said at that time) and family indices of various kinds. Most striking was the relationship between the nonwhite male unemployment rate and the number of AFDC cases opened. Between 1948 (when the present unemployment data series begins) and 1961 we found a correlation, as I recall, of .91. Whereupon the correlation, having already weakened, went negative. The unemployment rate went down, the number of new AFDC cases went up. James Q. Wilson has called this "Moynihan's scissors." It persisted through the decade.

As I later showed in a paper in the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, this "scissors" occurred over a considerable range of subjects. Thus the percent of nonwhite married women separated from their husbands continued to rise even as nonwhite male unemployment dropped. Something was happening.

I must be clear. I did not know what. I was well beyond my methodological depth. You ought to have known a lot more than I did to feel comfortable telling the President of the United States that the nation was "approaching a new crisis in race relations." Yet we were not alone in sensing trouble. At this time, for example, Kenneth Clark was writing of the "massive deterioration of the fabric of [black] society and its institutions," of "the tangle of pathology" in what we would come to call the inner city, of "protest
masculinity,” and so on. What we added was the sense of impending instability, the possibility, as I would write in Commentary in 1967, “that the situation had begun feeding on itself.” In any event, as President Kennedy would say, to govern is to choose. If we were wrong, I thought, no great harm could come of it; I chose to bet that we were right.

As it turned out, we were right enough in our forecasts. Let me be spare in the particulars. Something did snap in the early 1960s. The illegitimacy ratio among blacks rose from 24 percent to a current 63.5 percent. Of black children born between 1967 and 1969, 72.3 percent were on welfare before reaching age eighteen, which is to say they were paupers; not a pretty word but not a pretty condition. Census data show that in 1964 some 75 percent of black children under age six were living in a married-couple family. By 1990—in a steady descent—this ratio had dropped to 37.4 percent.

Alan Wolfe of the New School for Social Research sums up the situation in a recent New Republic review essay:

Whatever progress has been achieved for middle-class blacks ... the condition of the urban black poor has deteriorated over the past quarter century, to the point where it threatens all the other gains in race relations that were realized during the same period.

This, of course, is precisely as forecast.

However, I was absolutely wrong in thinking that no harm would come of this work. Possibly great harm was done. This was not clear at the outset. Rather the contrary. In a hurried sequence in early June, 1965, President Johnson decided to make the strengthening of the black social structure, specifically family structure, the theme of a major address at Howard University. On a Thursday, I wrote a first draft, overnight the White House turned out a second, and the speech was given on Friday afternoon, June 4. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The policy paper remained well in the background.

**Controversy**

The paper became public in the aftermath of the urban riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles some three months later. On August 17, 1965, Bill Moyers, then presidential press secretary, gave out copies to a baffled White House press corps. The next day,
August 18, Evans and Novak recounted the findings in a column entitled, “The Moynihan Report.”

The report soon became available and evoked, for the most part, indignation and denial. In retrospect, it is not hard to see why. Social science is not rocket science. The opening chapter of the report stated:

There is no very satisfactory way, at present, to measure social health or social pathology within an ethnic, or religious, or geographical community. Data are few and uncertain, and conclusions drawn from them, including the conclusions that follow, are subject to the grossest error.

No one would launch a spacecraft on the basis of an engineering report that warned of the possibility of “the grossest error” in design. There was, and is, no institutional capacity to review the data and the conclusions, such as exists, say, for papers published in the New England Journal of Medicine. The report should have been published, but the thesis ought never to have been raised to the level of presidential pronouncement. Even though, to repeat with a measure of insistence, we turned out to be accurate in our forecast.

Sociologist Lee Rainwater undertook to examine the ruckus along with a young colleague, William Y. Yancey. The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy was published two years later in 1967. It opens with this passage from Louis Wirth’s Preface to Karl Manheim’s 1936 work, Ideology and Utopia:

The distinctive character of social science discourse is to be sought in the fact that every assertion, no matter how objective it may be, has ramifications extending beyond the limits of science itself. Since every assertion of a “fact” about the social world touches the interests of some individual or group, one cannot even call attention to the existence of certain “facts” without courting the objections of those whose very raison d’être in society rests upon a divergent interpretation of the “factual” situation.

In feverish times—and those were feverish times—this normal disposition can become pathological in itself. One is reminded of Hannah Arendt’s observation that the tactical advantage of the totalitarians in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s derived from their ability to turn every statement of fact into a question of motive. I was everywhere attacked in this mode, being charged with “blaming the victim.”
In 1968, rummaging through the data of the Coleman report, I came upon what seemed to me further evidence that family structure, a surrogate for class, would become increasingly significant. Coleman and his associates had obtained information from students as to family composition. In the still caste-segregated schools of the rural South, this circumstance had at most a slight influence on achievement. Ninth graders scored at fifth-grade levels regardless. By contrast, in the urban North, black family structure was associated with almost one year's difference in grade level. For whites the difference was even more pronounced. So, clearly, this was the direction in which things were heading.

The Great Society's legacy

In retrospect, my assessment would be that had the policy paper never been written, or never risen to the level of presidential pronouncement, the social changes it forecast would have come about in any event, and would have gradually been recorded and acknowledged. That would have made it easier for them to be accepted in the political world, and might have given social scientists the opportunity to sort it all out.

The problem was that the constituency groups whose support and involvement was needed to carry forward policies directed to the problem could not accept the problem as we had defined it. And so it came to pass that a generation later it was defined by persons with quite different political sympathies. In the spring of 1992, Attorney General William P. Barr had no qualms on the matter. Family breakdown, which was the source of crime, was the "grim harvest of the Great Society," largely the result of "welfare policies." This is manifestly absurd. The breakdown was there in the data before the Great Society, just as the welfare system was there before the Great Society.

And yet, the Attorney General had a point. Or may have had a point. For a brief time, the Great Society gave great influence in social policy to viewpoints that rejected the proposition that family structure might be a social issue. Accordingly, even if social policy might have produced some effective responses, no such policies were attempted. In that sense, the current crisis is indeed a "grim harvest of the Great Society."

The reaction to the Moynihan report effectively banished the subject from the academy. That period may now be easing, how-
ever. In 1984 William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Neckerman picked up those “scissors” and began to puzzle anew over the subject. In 1986 they published an analysis showing that the crossover disappears when the number of AFDC cases is charted against the nonwhite male labor force non-participation rate. This and other work has led Wilson to fruitful insights into the role of male employment and earnings in the central city—the issues at the heart of our research in the Department of Labor a generation ago.

More recently, economists Richard Freeman and Paul Osterman have looked into the natural experiment of the 1980s, when employment rose dramatically. They found that a tight labor market sharply lowered the official unemployment rate, but did nothing to reverse “the trend toward single-parenthood, to lower the inner-city crime rate or to appreciably reduce the proportion of men who had stopped working.” The lesson, according to Freeman, is that full employment “is necessary but not sufficient.”

All this is consistent, or so I would think, with Wilson and Neckerman’s 1986 analysis and with the 1965 report. The problem then as now is that no one has a clue as to what it would take for public policy to be sufficient.

Here we come to the crux of the issue of social science and social policy. We are at the point of knowing a fair amount about what we don’t know. The past quarter-century has been on the whole productive in this regard. On the other hand, our social situation is vastly worse.

In 1965 we had at least slight purchase on the issue as it was then—the employment nexus. Further, the federal government, along with state and local government, was solvent. Indeed, over a fifteen-month period from early 1969 to mid-1970 I took part in a fierce debate within the Nixon White House, joined in by almost every cabinet department and, of course, the then-Bureau of the Budget, over the desirability of the President proposing to Congress that the federal government establish a guaranteed annual income. This ill-fated proposal became known as the Family Assistance Plan. The subject of cost scarcely arose. It was simply a given that if the idea was defensible on its merits, the money would be found. It will be a generation, if ever, before any such assumption will again be possible within the counsels of the presidency.

And then there are today’s epidemics. We have no cure for AIDS, and no pharmacological treatment for cocaine dependency,
albeit there is reasonable hope that medical science will produce some therapies. As for social science, there would seem to be less confidence than ever. This pessimism is in ways a legacy of the Great Society. In the late 1960s, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences sponsored a long and fruitful seminar on the subject of poverty. I contributed a paper, "The Professors and the Poor," which, on the well-known adage that data is the plural of anecdote, began by telling of a lady who had come to see me at the Joint Center for Urban Studies seeking support for a federal anti-poverty grant and complaining that none were being given out in her neighborhood in Boston. I demurred: Roxbury was being deluged with programs. "Exactly," came the retort from my visitor, "but do you notice they only fund programs that don't succeed." A decade later, Peter H. Rossi would distill this insight in "Rossi's Iron Law":

If there is any empirical law that is emerging from the past decade of widespread evaluation research activities, it is that the expected value for any measured effect of a social program is zero.

A new candor

This is not a counsel of despair. It is useful knowledge. As recently as 1960, Loren Baritz noted in The Servants of Power: "Intellectuals in the United States have long bemoaned the assumed fact that they are unloved and unappreciated by their society." The last three decades have seen a role reversal in this regard. Especially in foreign policy, intellectual academics assumed awesome powers. Much simpler applications come to mind, as for example a recent address by President Bush to the National League of Cities:

The urgency is clear. We all know the statistics, perhaps you know them better than most Americans, the dreary drumbeat that tells of family breakdown. Today, one out of every four American children is born out of wedlock. In some areas, the illegitimacy rate tops 80 percent. A quarter of our children grow up in households headed by a single parent. More than two million are called latchkey kids who come home from school each afternoon to an empty house. And a large number of our children grow up without the love of parents at all, with nobody knowing their name.†

†The President, or someone such, might usefully note that illegitimacy ratios are rising in most, if not all, industrial countries. The 1969 Canadian ratio of 9.2 percent had risen to 23.1 percent by 1989.
So far as I can learn, no president of the United States has ever made such a statement, ever come close to such a suggestion. And there was no objection. It was a statistic. No small achievement of social science, those numbers. But not seen as mysterious or arbitrary. If some overnight opinion poll had told the speechwriters they could or even should use such materials, well, chalk up another social-science achievement—the opinion poll. Surely, the public learned from what the President said, becoming in consequence more amenable to thoughtful action, whatever that might be. No small achievement.

This willingness was much in evidence in an extraordinary speech on “Race and the American City” delivered on the Senate floor in March by Senator Bill Bradley (D-NJ). Here is a sample:

In politics for the last twenty-five years, silence or distortion has shaped the issue of race and urban America. Both political parties have contributed to the problem. Republicans have played the race card in a divisive way to get votes—remember Willie Horton—and Democrats have suffocated discussion of a self-destructive behavior among the minority population in a cloak of silence and denial. The result is that yet another generation has been lost. We cannot afford to wait longer. It is time for candor, time for truth, and time for action.

The speech was not only extraordinary in its explicitness, but also in its reception. It was the subject of a lead editorial in the New York Times, while the Washington Post reprinted part of the text. Four days later, at Yale University, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts offered no less an explicit or extraordinary address:

I ask you to consider a reality where more than 80 percent of babies are born to single mothers; where young men die violently at a rate exceeding that of any American war; where only one child in three finishes high school and even then, too often, can barely read; where the spread of AIDS and homelessness rips so visibly at the fabric of community; where far too many families are on welfare for far too long; and where far too many children carry guns instead of lunch boxes to school.

Riots past and present

On April 29, within days of these speeches, a jury exonerated white officers of the Los Angeles Police Department in a case involving the beating of a black motorist. Rioting broke out in the black neighborhoods of the city and continued for some days, with great loss of life and property and an even greater loss of compo-
sure among national leaders. On the basis of what is now known, the tumult followed closely the pattern first described by Harold Orlans (then Orlansky) in his classic 1943 report, *The Harlem Riot, A Study in Mass Frustration*. The sequence began with an altercation in which a white police officer wounded a black soldier. A crowd gathered. A "drunken cop" was said to have killed a black soldier who had been protecting his mother.

The looting that followed was near total, wrote Orlans, save for establishments where "Negro store-owners placed signs reading 'Colored.'" The rioters were young males. The police were targets. "Some 60 policemen were shot, stabbed, beaten, stoned, or even bitten by rioters." Among others, two fifteen-year-old British seamen were mobbed, but Mayor LaGuardia declared, "This was not a race riot." Orlans disagreed, observing that "The Harlem riot was essentially racial, featuring attacks upon white property and the white police force in which the mass of the Negro population joined." He ascribed this to frustration in the paradigm set forth six years earlier by John Dollard in *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. This pattern was in place for the next half-century. Los Angeles, however, appeared different. The aggression against whites seems to have moved beyond black neighborhoods. The consequent racial fears are likely to be far greater. And so the "new crisis in race relations" of which we wrote a generation ago is now with us, and in a worse form than even we fully comprehended. And yet we seem no longer quite so willing to deny it.

Of all the changes in the political climate now taking place, none seems more important to me than the readiness of welfare "advocates," as they came to be known and indeed to so describe themselves, to acknowledge the "tangle of pathology" which set off a firestorm when I borrowed Kenneth Clark's term a generation ago. Thus, in the current welfare debate, Hillary Clinton, wife of the Governor of Arkansas and former chairman of the board of the Children's Defense Fund, insists that the message her husband is trying to get out is "Quit being a victim." The one recommendation of the 1965 paper on the Negro family was this:

> The policy of the United States is 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.
For some time, talk of responsibilities was thought suspect by many. No longer. An editorial supporting Bill Clinton in a 1992 Democratic primary contest observed that “He talks more of opportunity than entitlement, of responsibilities as well as rights.”

**Social science and social policy**

What is more, something we have known for some time, demographics are at last turning our way, if I may use that term. The proportion of fifteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds as a percent of the total population has been declining since the mid-1980s and we forecast that it will continue to do so well into the next century. The size of the cohort most at risk grows smaller, after nearly overwhelming social institutions in the 1950s and 1960s.

This is surely the case in the world of the social sciences, which is in the main politically liberal, and went through an awful period of silence and denial—or rather, denial and denunciation. A striking feature of the 1960s was that just as a large consensus in favor of social-science-oriented social action took shape, a considerable body of social science appeared which, in effect, said don’t expect too much. Think, for example, of the writing in the early editions of *The Public Interest*. Almost without exception, the authors were political liberals who had stumbled upon things that weren’t entirely pleasing to them, but which, as the song goes, could not be denied. I have referred to this as the Reformation. Not a few of the heretics were burned at the stake, and more than a few left the true church for good and all. But their witness prevailed. I take it as no coincidence that in 1992 James Q. Wilson is president of the American Political Science Association and James S. Coleman president of the American Sociological Association. Their influence has in the end proved immensely important; and so might their example. For while each has ever sought to make social science available to social policy, each has kept his distance from government. Not from fastidiousness, but from understanding. They have known how little is known, and how readily that which can be said to be known is misunderstood or misused.