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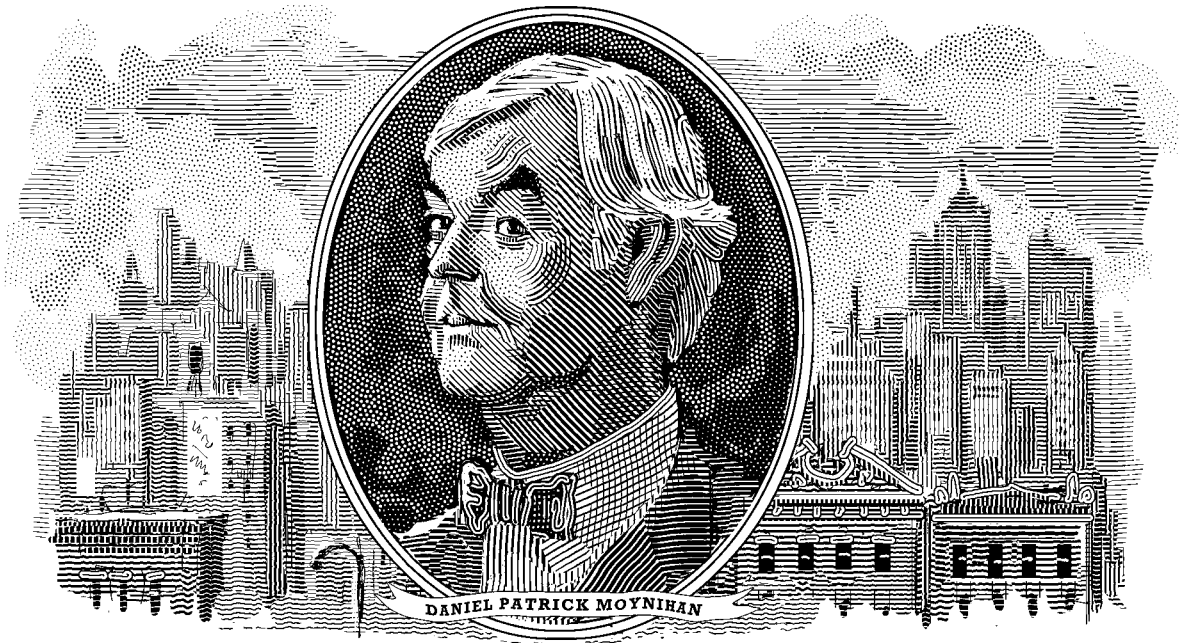
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Book Review by Steven F. Hayward

STANDING PAT

Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary,
edited by Steven R. Weisman. Public Affairs, 705 pages, \$35



IN 2000, SHORTLY BEFORE HE LEFT THE Senate, Daniel Patrick Moynihan gave a speech fully displaying the paradoxes that defined his career. Soaring prescription drug prices were a hot issue at the time. Incoming President George W. Bush's eventual solution was Medicare Part D, a costly new entitlement that had the dubious distinction of being wholly unfunded. Moynihan urged a different approach: price controls. But, he added, "when we do that, we'd better hope the Swiss pharmaceutical industry keeps working," because the shrunken profits of American pharmaceutical companies would constrict their ability to innovate. There, distilled in consecutive sentences, was the Moynihan contradiction—the confidence in using government to solve social problems, alongside the clear-eyed recognition that the limitations and unintended consequences of government intervention cannot be wished away.

Moynihan seemed to be in the middle of every major political controversy for 40 years. As a result, this new collection of his letters, memoranda, and diary entries, ably edited and annotated by former *New York Times* reporter Steven Weisman, illuminates not only Moynihan's thought and character, but the age he lived in.

Few analysts were more prescient; the harder questions about Moynihan's legacy are to what extent he made a difference, and

whether the differences he did make were for the better or worse. Moynihan predicted back in 1965 that the increase of illegitimacy and single-mother households would bring social disaster for black communities. He told Richard Nixon in 1969 that women's rights would be the emerging issue of the 1970s. Moynihan and Ronald Reagan were the only two public officials who predicted in the early 1980s that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse. "The defining event of the decade," the senator wrote in 1980, "might well be the breakup of the Soviet Union."

Moynihan didn't get everything right. In 1964 he brought Ralph Nader to Washington—a mistake that had the unintended consequence of preventing an Al Gore presidency 37 years later. Moynihan thought Watergate would destroy conservatism. Above all, he was spectacularly wrong in predicting that the 1996 welfare reform act would result in millions of destitute families and children living on the street. "Thus ends the progressive era," he declared in a note to himself. If only.

BECAUSE MOYNIHAN WROTE AND SPOKE with an insider's discernment and clarity about the defects of liberalism, conservatives often liked him. Although he compiled a near-perfect liberal voting record during his 24 years in the Senate, liberals often did not like him. His candor about the severity of so-

cial pathologies and the limited ability of public policy to ameliorate them was a greater affront than conservatives' opposition. Like devout adherents of other faiths, modern liberals believe apostates are worse than infidels.

In 1989 Moynihan defended his consistency in a letter to Louis Henkin of Columbia University: "I had never represented myself as anything other than a liberal Democrat. Accordingly, my votes didn't take any explaining. What would have taken explaining was to have started voting differently." (In one of his older letters—from 1963—Moynihan says "I believe in quotas and lots of other un-American devices.") He went on to explain why so many on the Left made him a pariah:

Those of us who began writing about these [social policy] matters in the 1960's were fully in agreement with all that liberalism was attempting. But we began to worry as to whether we would bring it off. This kind of critique was much too often greeted as a renunciation of goals rather than an inquiry as to means.

As a White House advisor writing to President Nixon in 1969, however, Moynihan expressed deep misgivings about what liberalism was attempting: "The fact is that the more one knows about welfare the more horrible it becomes: but not because of cheating, rather be-



Excerpts from Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan's statement on the United Nations resolution equating Zionism with racism, delivered on November 10, 1975.

The United States rises to declare before the General Assembly of the United Nations, and before the world, that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.

Not three weeks ago, the United States Representative in the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee pleaded in measured and fully considered terms for the United Nations not to do this thing. It was, he said, "obscene." It is something more today, for the furtiveness with which this obscenity first appeared among us has been replaced by a shameless openness....

As this day will live in infamy, it behooves those who sought to avert it to declare their thoughts so that historians will know that we fought here, that we were not small in number—not this time—and that while we lost, we fought with full knowledge of what indeed would be lost....

The proposition to be sanctioned by a resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations is that "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination." Now this is a lie. But as it is a lie which the United Nations has now declared to be a truth, the actual truth must be restated.

The very first point to be made is that the United Nations has declared Zionism to be racism—without ever having defined racism. "Sentence first—verdict afterwards," as the Queen of Hearts said. But this is not wonderland, but a real world, where there are real consequences to folly and to venality....

The word "racism" is a creation of the English language, and relatively new to it. It is not, for instance, to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary. The term derives from relatively new doctrines—all of them discredited—concerning the human population of the world, to the effect that there are significant biological differences among clearly identifiable groups, and that these differences establish, in effect, different levels of humanity....

(continued on next page)

cause the system destroys those who receive it, and corrupts those who dispense it." He made a similar point 20 years later in a letter to a liberal Democrat, Governor Mario Cuomo of New York: "There are simply limits to what can be achieved by large hierarchical government organizations." Yet Moynihan seldom seemed to mark out those limits in his legislating. How to make sense of this cognitive dissonance, which looks like political fecklessness?

THE SIMPLEST EXPLANATION IS THAT Moynihan, who was elected to the Senate in 1976 after narrowly defeating the far-left congresswoman Bella Abzug in a Democratic primary, had a practical need to vote Left if he wanted to survive as a New York politician. Indeed, in subsequent elections left-wing activists made noises about running a challenger against him. A more generous account is that as an FDR Democrat who identified with the working class, Moynihan was, for all his intellectual independence, a loyal team player when it came time to vote aye or nay.

Both explanations are perfectly reasonable, as Moynihan himself might have put it. But a close reading of his letters suggests other, more discouraging possibilities. As one would expect, Moynihan is more candid in private communications about certain delicate points than he chose to be in his speeches and published articles. In the 1970s, for example, Moynihan wrote publicly, "Liberalism faltered when it turned out it could not cope with truth," and contended the new political culture of the Left "rewarded the articulation of moral purpose more than the achievement of practical good." In his letters he was more accusatory, writing to E.J. Dionne in 1991, "The liberal project began to fail when it began to lie. That was the mid sixties...the rot set in and has continued since."

Moynihan had raw personal reasons for feeling this way. As an assistant secretary of labor, he wrote the famous report in 1965 on the looming crisis of the black family. Both he and the report quickly became the objects of remarkably strident attacks that marked the beginning of political correctness—the willful, often enforced closing of minds to inconvenient topics and perspectives. (The denunciations grew louder four years later when Moynihan's "benign neglect" memo to Nixon was leaked to the press. It argued, quite sensibly, "We may need a period in which Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades.") The author of the "Moynihan Report" noted in 1985 that because of the firestorm it occasioned, "a twenty year silence commenced in which almost no one worked on the subject [of race]." In another letter to an old colleague he

added, "We have paid a fearful price for what American scholars in those years decided not to learn about."

As important as race was, liberals closed ranks and minds about even bigger questions. By the time Moynihan went to work for Nixon in 1969, he perceived that liberalism was fast decaying into something loathsome and terrifying. In 1970 he wrote to H.R. Halde- man, Nixon's chief of staff:

What we are facing is the onset of nihilism in the United States.... The three most important points are that nihilists are almost entirely drawn from the educated, even upper classes. They are extremely idealistic, seeing themselves as agents of the purest charity. They are violent in the most extreme ways.

As an example Moynihan singled out Bernadine Dohrn, a leader of the anti-war terrorist group, the Weather Underground, who went on to become one of Barack Obama's Hyde Park supporters.

That he wasn't thinking just of the New Left radical fringe was made clear in Moynihan's speculation to Nixon, "Are we then witnessing the ultimate, destructive working out of the telos of liberal thought?" In another note to Nixon he observed: "The elite intelligentsia of the country are turning against the country—in science, in politics, in the foundations of patriotism. How can we not pay for this?"

GIVEN SUCH CLARITY ABOUT THE COM- pleteness of the liberal collapse, how is it that Moynihan never seriously considered switching sides, openly joining the conservative opposition? His private writings offer several explanations, starting with his basic conviction that conservatives weren't up to the job. Several letters attest to his belief that the Left was more competent than the Right. "I kept trying to tell people in the [Nixon] administration that a fundamental fact of their dialectical and rhetorical position was that they were permanently outclassed." To Vice President Spiro Agnew, whose fierce rhetoric against liberals he wanted to tone down, Moynihan argued:

It comes to this. You are hopelessly outnumbered.... There are not a half dozen other Republicans who are in any way so disposed and so equipped. You are alone. You have no troops. No one carries on your argument, no one elaborates it, no one initiates comparable and parallel arguments. No journal of any



intellectual status is open to your point of view.... My point would be this. You cannot win the argument you are now engaged in. Frankly, the longer you pursue it, I expect the more you will lose.

These firm beliefs about the correlation of political and intellectual forces help explain the single instance in which Moynihan worked to make a Republican administration less, rather than more, cautious and centrist. As ambassador to the United Nations in 1975–76 under President Gerald Ford, Moynihan pointedly said the U.S. should “raise hell” and go into explicit opposition in the General Assembly. And then he raised hell, calling out Turtle Bay’s tyrants and kleptocrats just as Agnew called out the “effete corps of impudent snobs” in the *intelligentsia*. Indeed, Moynihan’s splendid speech attacking the risible “Zionism is Racism” resolution ranks next to Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech as a career-maker, propelling Moynihan to the Senate a year later.

BUT THAT SPEECH MIGHT ALSO BE SEEN AS an attack against a proxy for the American Left, which Moynihan believed was too powerful to be attacked directly. His reflections about the competence and strength of the Left suggest he was willing to openly oppose its nihilism at the U.N. precisely because in that forum, at least, it was essentially powerless. This raises the troubling possibility, however, that Moynihan lacked the courage of his convictions. It requires little bravery to oppose those who cannot strike back.

He offers evidence for this hypothesis in a remarkable 1973 letter to sociologist Nathan Glazer, ostensibly about the growing Watergate disaster. It quickly turned, however, to Moynihan’s extended reflections on his ambivalence about supporting Nixon openly against George McGovern in 1972, despite admitting that he privately supported Nixon’s re-election:

What do you call such a person? A Moynihan, I suppose. A term suggestive of moral and political failing. Yet what is it? Two things, somewhat opposed. First, the moral failing of being more concerned with deviations from one’s own general position than with positions flatly and openly opposed.

Previously Moynihan had told Nixon that “I know there is an authoritarian Left in this country, and I fear it.” Now he seems to admit that this fear is for himself as much as for his country, a suspicion that deepens when Moynihan gets to the second explanation of his admitted failing—that the Left is simply

This meaning is clear. It is equally clear that this assumption, this belief, has always been altogether alien to the political and religious movement known as Zionism.... Now it was the singular nature—if I am not mistaken, it was the unique nature—of this national liberation movement that in contrast with the movements that preceded it, those of that time, and those that have come since, it defined its members in terms not of birth, but of belief. That is to say, it was not a movement of the Irish to free Ireland, or of the Polish to free Poland, not a movement of Algerians to free Algeria, nor of Indians to free India.... To the contrary, Zionists defined themselves merely as Jews, and declared to be Jewish anyone born of a Jewish mother or—and this is the absolutely crucial fact—anyone who converted to Judaism. Which is to say, in the terms of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted by the 20th General Assembly, anyone—regardless of “race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin....”

What we have at stake here is not merely the honor and the legitimacy of the State of Israel—although a challenge to the legitimacy of any member nation ought always to arouse the vigilance of all members of the United Nations. For a yet more important matter is at issue, which is the integrity of that whole body of moral and legal precepts which we know as human rights.

The terrible lie that has been told here today will have terrible consequences. Not only will people begin to say, indeed they have already begun to say, that the United Nations is a place where lies are told, but far more serious, grave and perhaps irreparable harm will be done to the cause of human rights itself. The harm will arise first because it will strip from racism the precise and abhorrent meaning that it still precariously holds today. How will the peoples of the world feel about racism, and about the need to struggle against it, when they are told that it is an idea so broad as to include the Jewish national liberation movement?

As this lie spreads, it will do harm in a second way. Many of the members of the United Nations owe their independence in no small part to the notion of human rights, as it has spread from the domestic sphere to the international sphere and exercised its influence over the old colonial powers. We are now coming into a time when that independence is likely to be threatened again. There will be new forces, some of them arising now, new prophets and new despots, who will justify their actions with the help of just such distortions of words as we have sanctioned here today.... [H]ow will the small nations of the world defend themselves, on what grounds will others be moved to defend and protect them, when the language of human rights, the only language by which the small can be defended, is no longer believed and no longer has a power of its own?

There is this danger, and then a final danger that is the most serious of all. Which is that the damage we now do to the idea of human rights and the language of human rights could well be irreversible.

The idea of human rights as *we* know it today is not an idea which has always existed in human affairs. It is an idea which appeared at a specific time in the world, and under very special circumstances.... But most of the world does not hold with that philosophy now. Most of the world believes in newer modes of political thought, in philosophies that do not accept the individual as distinct from and prior to the State, in philosophies that therefore do not provide any justification for the idea of human rights and philosophies that have no words by which to explain their value. If we destroy the words that were given to us by past centuries, we will not have words to replace them, for philosophy today has no such words.

But there are those of us who have not forsaken these older words, still so new to much of the world. Not forsaken them now, not here, not anywhere, not ever.

The United States of America declares that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.



stronger and more competent than the Right, and therefore cannot be successfully resisted. Even though the American people were moving to the Right, “there was a movement of political competence to the left.”

We knew this. Over and over Norman [Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary*] would tell me that the administration would someday be ruined by its seeming relentless insistence on incurring the hostility of *men who simply outclassed it*. (Emphasis in the original.)

In other words, Moynihan was unwilling to leave the winning side to join the losing side. He was intimidated. At best, doubting conservatism’s ability to resist liberalism effectively, he feared relinquishing the presumptive moral authority of liberalism if he joined the Right.

His perception that the Right was not up to the job of effectively challenging the Left (or even running a serious conservative administration) was accurate in the Nixon years. Moynihan’s admonitions could be read as a thoughtful, prudent strategy for navigating through the unprecedented political storms of the day. But the relative strength of the Right was growing fast, in no small part because some disaffected liberals were willing to make a clean break.

Others in his cohort—Podhoretz, for example—became “neoconservatives.” Though it clearly fit him, Moynihan hated and resisted that label. His rejection of it points to the most obvious difference between him and those who accepted it: none of them was ever much interested in holding public office. In

fact, it’s impossible to imagine Irving Kristol or Nathan Glazer enduring Senate life, let alone engaging in the grubby glad-handing of campaigning. Moynihan, by contrast, relished retail politics, and loved being a senator. He was a public man, in the classical sense of the term. Perhaps, then, the judgment that the Left intimidated him is too harsh. A more charitable interpretation of his political career would emphasize the pragmatic maneuvering needed to remain viable within the Democratic Party, in the slim hope of reviving the more sober liberalism that had predated the Great Society. An honorable cause but, alas, a hopeless one.

ANOTHER TROUBLING STRAND EMERGES in his private writings: his insecurity, bordering at times on an inferiority complex. In a journal entry from his post as ambassador to India in 1974, he writes:

I have turned down the kindest of offers to join the Committee on Social Thought at [the University of] Chicago, writing [university president Edward] Levi that while [Edward] Shils and [Saul] Bellow and [William] Kruskal don’t know this, I am not their equal. Were I to settle among them they would find out, and while they would never in the least way suggest that they had come to realize this, I would know they had and that would make it a waste for everyone. I have had singular difficulties in these matters.

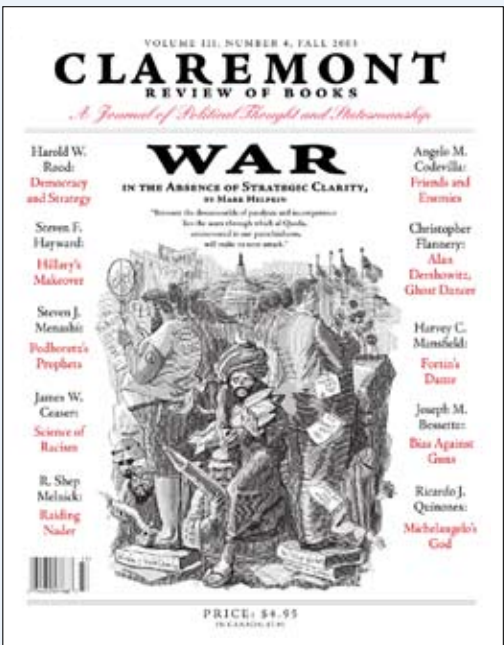
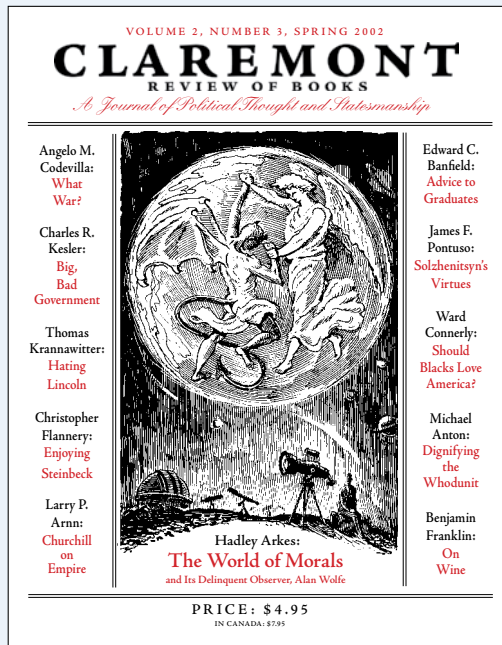
The “singular difficulties” probably involve his travails in obtaining a tenured faculty position at Harvard; several passages in

Weisman’s collection suggest it was a close affair. The vain and surely ineffectual protests against what he considered slanders, such as his alleged fondness for strong drink and his oft-expressed anxiety about impecuniousness, all seem to be of a piece, even after discounting for false modesty. As one reads his least guarded writings, Moynihan’s insecurity comes into sharper focus, and looms large as a factor in his political choices.

This insecurity brings to mind Charles Peguy’s harsh aphorism, “It will never be known what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of looking insufficiently progressive.” Unhappily, this seems to explain quite a lot about Moynihan. Ultimately, he was not up to the job of successfully opposing what was worst and most dangerous in liberalism.

Added to a body of published work that was already formidable, these newly available writings offer evidence lifting the Moynihan story toward tragedy—for both him and the nation. He was a member of a very small club: politicians good enough at politics that they would be remembered if they had done nothing else, while good enough at something else that they would be remembered if they had never been in politics. Thus, we miss him. The pity is that had Pat Moynihan chosen or been constituted differently, we might miss him even more.

Steven F. Hayward is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a senior fellow at the Pacific Research Institute, and the author, most recently, of The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counter-Revolution, 1980–1989 (Crown Forum).



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