The Nixon-Moynihan Alliance

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We think 2010 has been a tumultuous political year, but it has been a gentile tea party compared to 1968, the year that brought Richard Nixon and Daniel Patrick Moynihan together. In April, Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered in cold blood, igniting race riots across the nation that left dozens of people dead. In Washington the mobs numbered in the tens of thousands and buildings stretching many blocks up 14th Street burned for five days. Fourteen thousand Marine and Army troops—the largest military occupation of a city since the Civil War—patrolled the streets and finally held the rioters at bay two blocks from the White House. Two months later, Robert F. Kennedy was murdered point-blank the evening he won the California Democratic primary which would have sealed his nomination for president. In another eleven weeks, at the Democratic Convention, Chicago was once again seized by bloody riots, this time instigated from the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum.

The violence was merely the worst of the mayhem running throughout the year, the result of furious political divisions over, first, the Vietnam War and, second, the circumstances of black Americans and poor city communities following the heady days of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the War on Poverty and Great Society programs. Pat Moynihan—Harvard professor, director of the MIT-Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies—was a liberal Democrat (the L word was still in use then and Pat used it proudly) and had been campaigning with the anti-war Robert Kennedy the week before he was gunned down. In the course of the year Pat published two astonishing essays in *Commentary* magazine—in May, after King's murder, "The Democrats, Kennedy, and the Murder of Dr. King"; then in August, after Kennedy's murder, "The Professors and the Poor."

We, he wrote—we liberal intellectuals—have since 1960 been at the center of political power as never before and have had our way on virtually everything we cared about. We began with supreme confidence in our ability to control events abroad and in our own society, through bold interventions, guided by our brilliant ideas and idealism,

that would confront injustice, right wrongs, and set the world swiftly on a new course—one not only more admirable but more stable, more united, more harmonious. And after eight years, what have we got? Some historic achievements to be sure (the Civil Rights Act) but, overwhelmingly, national disintegration: riot and bedlam, angry disillusionment especially among the poor and black on the one hand and the privileged, educated young on the other, the rise of new forces of political radicalism and militancy, in sum a republic "approaching a condition of instability." Were we perhaps a bit too sanguine about the willingness of the world to accede to the rational theorizing at which we excel? "We liberal Democrats," he wrote, "had best begin asking this question of ourselves, or else others—Richard M. Nixon, for one—will surely be asking it for us."

And of course Pat was bristling with answers to get that conversation going. The architects of the War on Poverty and Great Society had been disconnected from the actual harsh circumstances of black urban poverty, and oblivious to the intrinsic social pathologies that any serious anti-poverty effort would need to confront—especially joblessness and family dissolution. They had been too smitten with fancy abstractions, especially the "community action" idea at the heart of the War on Poverty programs, and too uninterested in practical necessities, especially the need to get large numbers of black adult males into the world of work and family responsibility. We good liberals had underestimated the power of Establishments to resist our ministrations and twist them to their own purposes—in Washington, the great welfare and education bureaucracies; in the society, not only the Old Guard but also a New Guard—the *arriviste* working- and middle-class, our very own beneficiaries!—anxious to protect hard-won gains. We have been too dismissive (the bill of particulars went on) of conservative policy ideas: here he mentioned Milton Friedman's negative income tax and Melvin Laird's proposal to replace categorical grants with general-purpose revenue-sharing. Above all, the intelligentsia has been too little interested in mundane questions of program design, effectiveness, and evaluation: that is to say too little interested in actual results.

These essays—addressed to the liberal caucus but original, scholarly, filled with largeness of spirit and ardent to recover meaning and purpose from the ruins—were instrumental to Richard Nixon and Pat Moynihan finding each other. In November 1968, I found myself working at the Nixon transition office at the Pierre Hotel in New York City. The President-elect was intent on finding a genuine Democrat or two who

might be induced to join his administration; he had been greatly impressed by two recent articles in *Commentary* by Professor Moynihan of Harvard, where I had recently graduated. Did I know the man? Might he be suitable? What did he go by—was it Daniel or Dan? I did know him slightly, at least well enough to specify his proper familiar name (I had been busboy at the Tuesday Joint Center luncheons, where my compensation was sitting in on the faculty discussions). And so I was dispatched as secret courier to Cambridge, Massachusetts (surely historians will one day recognize my mission as the progenitor of Henry Kissinger's secret trips to Peking). Preliminary discussions were held, possibilities explored, documents exchanged. Pat was receptive and, when the President-elect and the Professor met at the Pierre, they hit it off.

Let me emphasize three features of the Nixon-Moynihan alliance.

First, it was not only the traumas of 1968, but also the circumstance (in that year but not much longer) that both the Republican and Democratic parties had both liberal and conservative wings, which made bi-partisan collaboration natural and genuine in a way that is difficult even to imagine today. Still, there is no other recent example of a prominent activist of one party ranging freely around the top counsels of a White House of the other party and being its spokesman on central issues of domestic policy. Something more was at work in the chemistry of the two men.

Second, both were intellectuals with strong practical streaks—intensely aware of constraint and difficulty and troubles lurking down the path, and accordingly interested in administration and political tactic: interested in results. This disposition had earned each of them the contempt of many intellectuals—Nixon from the beginning of his political career, Pat in the angry reactions to the Moynihan Report on the Negro family in 1965. Both felt the hurt of the outcast very acutely, and surely sympathized with the other's hurt. But what really brought them together was something positive: a shared fascination with the interplay of ideas and action, with the challenges of translating plausible ideas into practical results. Outflanking the yakety-yaks in the media and universities was only one aspect of the practical challenge of navigating from here to there. And Nixon was not at all adverse to the professoriate per se. His first-term White House was dominated by them as never before or since: the heavyweights with access and influence were professors Moynihan, Henry Kissinger, Arthur Burns, George Shultz, Paul McCracken, and Herb Stein.

Third, the criticism of Pat as an opportunist, happy to go with the flow of political power, which one sometimes heard back then and sometimes still hears today, was and

is a calumny. To be sure, Pat was a highly ambitious man, aware of his extraordinary gifts and determined to apply them to move the world. But he was also—and from the beginning, long before he had achieved any sort of renown—as principled a man as ever practiced politics, continuously assertive and argumentative in his captivating Irish way on behalf of propositions he regarded as vital, one who routinely took enormous, potentially career-ending risks on behalf of those propositions. Thanks to Steven Weisman's magnificent collection[1] we can see that Pat was dropping notes to candidate Nixon, and to his speechwriter-confidant Ray Price, in the course of the 1968 campaign. These were not the letters of a pandering office-seeker. For one thing they were congruent with his arguments to Harry McPherson in the LBJ White House at the same time. Even more, they were congruent with Pat's "Professors and the Poor" essay to which I have alluded. There he had lamented the omission from the poverty programs of any serious effort to increase employment among black men. Read the essay then read his letter to Nixon of October 24—he praises the candidate's recent campaign address for making it "clear and explicit" that "employment is the key to social stability," then pivots to urging resistance to Republican businessmen who would tolerate more unemployment as the price of fighting inflation, which would translate into much higher black unemployment with terrible social consequences. Here's some data; I'd be happy to send you more. Pat in private among kings and courtiers was utterly apiece with Pat the public intellectual.

I have called Pat's relationship with President Nixon an alliance, and it was genuinely such. The conventional wisdom is that Pat conceived his White House mission as saving the Great Society and poverty programs from retrograde Republicanism, that he was a big spender constantly at odds with the flinty tightwad Arthur Burns, that he invoked Disraeli to seduce Nixon away from genuine conservatism. This is a confusing oversimplification. For one thing, Pat could inveigh against government extravagance with the best of them, as in his vigorous opposition to the President's proposing government financing of a civilian supersonic airplane. For another, he would spend hours on the telephone with Nixon's liberal critics, advocating the administration's policies and decrying opposition carnivals as "defecating in the streets" (he used a more pungent word; this is my expletive-deleted). For another, although he and Arthur Burns did indeed conduct a battle royal over welfare reform, the

[1] Steven R. Weisman, ed., *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary* (2010).

liberal-conservative divide was a very different thing in those days, and Burns himself was far from a tightwad as we were about to discover. His tenure as chairman of the Federal Reserve (1970–1978) was an ignominious failure precisely because he followed the counsel of Pat's campaign letter to Nixon—opening up the money spigot whenever short-term unemployment began to rise rather than keeping his eye on long-term price stability, thereby producing a devastating upward spiral in both prices and unemployment.[2]

But I would like to make this point more specifically, with a little war story. My primary assignment in 1969 was to immerse myself in the Model Cities program and figure out what to do with it. Although President Nixon had told Pat to "get rid of Model Cities," neither the President nor Pat nor anyone else in the White House had much idea what the program was really about. And my charge from Pat was characteristically open-ended and amorphous.

Model Cities, enacted in 1966, had been the apotheosis of the Great Society programs, its crowning grandiose fantasy. It promised to transform selected troubled cities across the nation into gleaming, happy, problem-free Shangri-las—succeeding where urban renewal and the War on Poverty had failed—through a combination of rational planning at the local level and massive concentration of funds from the national level. I approached the program with the earnestness of youth and was horrified by what I discovered. The local plans were boilerplate grant-seeking. The promise of vast federal funding had generated frenzied expectations and summoned forth more than a few hucksters and frauds. And there was not going to be any concentration of federal funds—quite the contrary. The federal agencies administering established programs for job training, education, transportation, and the like were paying careful attention to Model Cities, but not for purposes of "coordination and concentration" as the program had envisioned. Instead they were taking Model Cities funding commitments as the occasion to redirect their own grants elsewhere. So Model Cities was effectively just writing checks to other Washington agencies and little was changing on the ground. The city-on-a-hill expectations the program had fostered were about to be crushed.

When I summarized my disillusioned findings to Pat, I concluded that President Nixon's initial policy instinct had been correct, and I added a neoconservative twist: if our sole aim was to improve the circumstances of the urban poor, we should start by

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[2] Documented in Allan H. Meltzer, *A History of the Federal Reserve: Volume 2, Book 2, 1970–1986* (2009).

abolishing the Model Cities charade forthwith. Pat responded by arching his great eyebrows and saying: "Ah-ha." And just how did I propose to do this? I hadn't a clue: I had done my homework, produced a brilliant, incontrovertible analysis—wasn't that enough? It was not; indeed my position, as I came later to realize, was the perfect mirror-image of the heedless liberal hubris of the poverty-warriors Pat had criticized in his 1968 essays.

But Pat knew what to do: Mel Laird's idea of broad federal revenue-sharing with states and localities, although addressed to the old pathologies of the categorical-grant programs, was even better suited to the new pathologies of Model Cities! A distinguished Task Force was commissioned, chaired by my Harvard mentor Edward C. Banfield and staffed by me, consisting of leading experts on federal-state fiscal and management issues. Following weeks of deliberation, and then during hours of Cabinet meetings, the Model Cities experience became the touchstone for formulating the administration's "New Federalism" initiative, combining Model Cities and other federal programs into general-purpose revenue sharing, enacted with bipartisan support in 1974. Pat did not "save" Model Cities. He recognized its excesses without dwelling on them, and engaged conservative, decentralizing ideas to the task of transforming it into something better, more realistic, more politically sustainable.[3]

Four years later, sitting in a law school student lounge watching the Watergate drama unfold on television, I thought to myself that there had certainly been a very large number of very young men running around the Nixon White House—young men with capacious mission assignments, pursued in many cases with rather more testosterone than experience and judgment. We Moynihan junior staffers had been part of that—it was Pat's lifelong practice to throw eager young activists into big ponds to sink or swim—but in our case we never lacked for adult supervision. Working with Pat the incandescent intellectual was an experience never to be equaled. But more important was working with Pat the astute practical politician, affable, clubbable, yet intently focused on engineering ideas into results, guided by his own highest ideal of Maximum Feasible Betterment—for us the lessons of a lifetime, for Pat the harbinger of greatness to come.

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[3] The Model Cities denouement is recounted in Edward C. Banfield, "Evaluating a Federal Program," in *Here the People Rule: Selected Essays* (2d ed. 1991), and Christopher DeMuth, "Deregulating the Cities," *The Public Interest*, No. 44, Summer 1976.