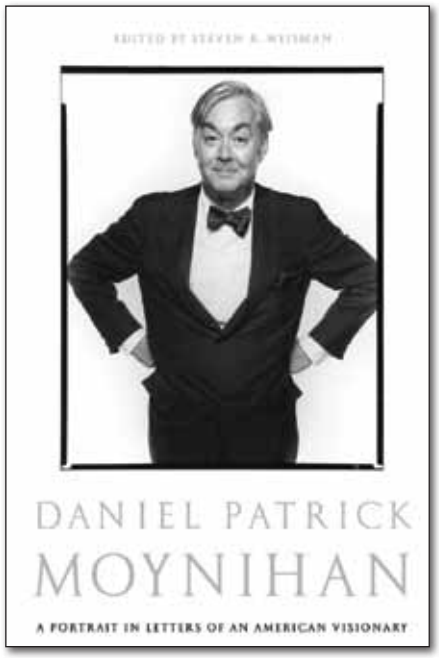
Moynihan's Legacy



Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary

by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Steven R. Weisman
PublicAffairs, 720 pp.

Great writer, lousy senator.

By Michael O'Donnell

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's main interests were matters of domestic policy like race and poverty, yet his single best and single worst moments occurred at the United Nations, where he served as U.S. ambassador from 1975 to 1976. In October 1975, just before a UN committee passed the terrible resolution declaring that "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination," Israel's delegate and future President Chaim Herzog rose and gave an impassioned speech denouncing "this pernicious resolution," closing with the shout that the Jewish people "shall never forget!" The measure then passed and was sent on to the full General Assembly, where it would be taken up several weeks later. The hall erupted in sustained applause. Moynihan pushed his way through to Herzog, shook his hand, and, in full view of the other delegates, embraced him and said, "Fuck 'em." In November 1975, immediately after the General Assembly passed the resolution by a vote of 72 to 35 with 32 abstentions—a vote regarded by many as the institution's lowest moment—Moynihan took the podium and gave the speech of his life, defiantly announcing that the United States "does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act."

Moynihan's worst moment followed just a month later. In December 1975, Suharto's Indonesia invaded East Timor, then a Portuguese colony, slaughtering and starving some 200,000 people—almost a third of East Timor's population. The United States was Suharto's ally and his main supplier of arms; President Ford and Henry Kissinger paid a visit to Jakarta the day before the atrocities began, and, as shown by documents declassified in 2001, assured Suharto that the United States had no objection if he felt obliged to take "rapid or drastic action." Their policy was tacit approval of a massacre—and Moynihan, their man at the UN, saw it done. As he later wrote, "The United States wished things to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success."

The reader will notice that Moynihan's embrace of Herzog—which was genuinely moving and powerful, the exact right thing to do—was ultimately a symbolic gesture. By contrast, his suppression of any meaningful defense of the Timorese people was enormously consequential, and led, indirectly, to the death of countless innocents. Without exaggerating Moynihan's role—the policy was Kissinger's, and Moynihan subsequently had the decency to acknowledge its, and his, shamelessness—it seems fair to say that in the case of East Timor, he did exactly the *wrong* thing. And so went Moynihan's career in public service: remarkable and even inspired rhetorically, but frequently less impressive in deed. He was a thinker and a writer more than a doer; he and the Senate, where he represented New York from 1976 to 2000, were largely wasted on each other. A profile in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2000 ably summed him up by describing him as the Senate's "sole intellectual, its chief gadfly and its finest literary stylist," embodying a unique blend of "courage, egotism, insight and petulance."

Steven Weisman, a former reporter for the *Times*, had his work cut out for him as the editor of a new collection of Moynihan's letters. Moynihan's reputation as a philosopher-poet precedes him, and his correspondence and memoranda comprise

the largest collection of personal papers housed in the Library of Congress. He was a prolific composer of letters, pamphlets, articles, and limericks; George Will wryly noted that Moynihan wrote or edited more books than some senators have read. Another challenge for Weisman lay in the participation of Moynihan's family in the project. The book was conceived by his daughter, who contributes a personal essay, and both she and Moynihan's widow are thanked extensively in the acknowledgments for their help. This may explain some of the book's lacunae: there is not a word on East Timor, nor on Moynihan's rough treatment of subordinates (he went through chiefs of staff like so many embroidered handkerchiefs from Harrods). An assembler of letters provides editorial comment through the selection of material rather than narrative text, and it is difficult to tell to what extent this collection is an independent study rather than a facsimile of the memoir that Moynihan never wrote. And unless a memoir is very poorly done—and Moynihan's certainly would not have been—its subject tends to come off quite well.

Moynihan is the subject of a biography published in 2000, Godfrey Hodgson's *The Gentleman From New York*, which is insightful and well written but about as tenaciously probing as its misty-eyed title suggests. (Hodgson and Moynihan were good friends.) The letters expand on many of Hodgson's themes: Moynihan's lifelong fascination with ethnicity; his tacking right during the 1970s and back to the left in the '80s and '90s; and throughout, the image of the lecturer-cum-statesman setting down his sherry to adjust his bow tie, exposing in the process elbows padded with leather and shirt cuffs pocked with holes. The book begins in 1951 in London, where Moynihan spent three years on a Fulbright scholarship and acquired his anglophilic tics. Subsequent letters follow him through local and state politics in New York; bit positions in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations; real proximity to power as an adviser to President Nixon and later his ambassador to India; street brawling at the UN; and finally—and somehow, least interestingly—the Senate. Whatever one's final verdict on the man, there is a lot of history at first hand in this volume.

Throughout every page of the letters but the last hundred or so, when grouchiness takes over, Moynihan is a delight to read. He was a gifted writer, funny, wry, quick with an allusion and good with a phrase, even as he stoked his own legend and trumpeted his prescience. (I lost count of the number of times he reminded someone that he predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union.) On the page if not in person, his cadences call to mind a Kingsley Amis or a Tory Christopher Hitchens armed with a doctorate, circa 1962. Here is Moynihan's counsel to President Johnson's aide Harry McPherson: "I very much fear that most of our cultural enterprises have their origin in the rather pathetic effort to prove to the Europeans that we have a soul. And a genteel, middle-class soul at that. Balls." Here he is on the splendor of the sculptures in the Ajanta Caves outside of Mumbai (keeping in mind that he consistently voted to support gay rights): "Nothing in Hellenism, too homosexual, nothing in Christianity, too repressed, nothing now, too confused, approaches this Buddhist statement of Woman." Perhaps the main lesson of this book is that we must all unstiffen our correspondence. Emulating Moynihan, I found myself drafting much jauntier business memoranda than usual over the past two months.

The letters provide extensive detail on the fallout over the "Moynihan Report," which was the most searing experience of his professional life. Entitled "The Negro Family," and prepared for Johnson in 1965, it identified the breakdown in the black family as the key cause of that group's urban poverty, perpetuating a vicious cycle of broken homes, unemployment, and welfare dependency. Moynihan sought to use the paradigm of the family to enlist conservative support for a bold plan of affirmative action, which would bring African Americans not just liberty, but equality. The report itself, however, was long on description and short on action steps, lending it the appearance of a pointed finger. Moynihan's analysis has since been largely vindicated and is echoed in such modern voices as Bill Cosby, the sociologist William Julius Wilson, and President Obama. Writing this year, historian James Patterson in the excellent book *Freedom Is Not Enough* observes that "Moynihan was preaching an aggressively liberal message. He did not blame blacks living in ghettos for having fallen into the depths: the source of their troubles was 'three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment.'" Patterson concludes that "[i]f a black person had produced such a report, it might well have received ... a respectful hearing among people who yearned to fight against racism and poverty in the cities." But the report's publication happened to coincide with the Watts riots, and contained too many provocative phrases, such as "tangle of pathology."

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Moynihan was branded a racist by black militants and their white fellow travelers. The letters contain countless

hurt, angry, and defeated entries stemming from the controversy. Here is one from 1966: "I think it fair to say that I took my lumps with as much dignity as one can muster whilst being anathemized by the likes of C. Sumner Stone and Stokely Carmichael ... President [Johnson] was badly let down by the white liberal community which panicked at the thought that it might have to pursue for a moment a line of thought unpopular with the Negro militants." He never felt the same way about the left again—nor it about him—and became one of the first neoconservatives. He contributed a strong collection of essays to *Commentary* and to Irving Kristol's *Public Interest*, culminating in "The United States in Opposition," in 1975, which blamed Third World countries for blaming their problems on the West. Moynihan argued that "[i]t is past time we ceased to apologize for an imperfect democracy. Find its equal. It is time we grew out of our initial—not a little condescending—supersensitivity about the feelings of new nations." Insightful and powerfully argued as the essay was, Moynihan did not consider that siding with brutal dictators like Suharto over little colonies like East Timor might influence the developing world's perception of America.

Bobbing in and out of academia, he campaigned for Hubert Humphrey in 1968 but hedged his bets by offering polite and unsolicited advice to Richard Nixon. He was brought on board as a domestic policy adviser and served as the in-house Democrat—a party affiliation he fiercely clung to throughout his career. Moynihan's willingness to work for Nixon horrified his friends in Johnson's cabinet and struck many as an unforgivable heresy. Some of his flattering memoranda collected in the letters are altogether too gooey for comfort, and he never had much influence within the administration. But even more of his memos during these years feature blunt advice from the left that read like the words of a man with nothing to lose. "I doubt anybody around here quite understands how menacing the administration has seemed to students and faculties alike," he wrote Nixon in 1970, after Nixon responded without sympathy to the Kent State shootings. Escalating the Vietnam War—a war Moynihan vocally opposed—into Cambodia would cause the administration to "lose the respect of our allies, and our self-respect," and Vice President Agnew's pit bull tactics "[make] you look duplicitous" as "[y]ou take the high road and your aides take the low road." The administration was wasting its time and credibility with "vulgar partisanship" and "hysterical demagoguery." The Nixon memos are the most fascinating documents in this collection, and serve as a reminder that even though he worked for Republican administrations, Moynihan never crossed over fully.

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His politics did not change under Reagan, but he did use the president's extreme positions to reestablish his bona fides as a Democrat. Breaking with the neoconservatives as they switched parties, he opposed the president's budget cuts and covert military operations, earning high ratings from liberal vote counters. But as the '80s gave way to the '90s, Moynihan could not bear to cede power to those smug ex-hippies Bill and Hillary. He seemed to think they were just the types who had called him a bigot in the 1960s. His positions on health care and welfare reform during the Clinton administration remain baffling. One might hope that the letters would reveal a better reason for throwing a stick in the wheel of health care—than vanity and petty grudges. But the letters enhance what was already known: a Clinton aide slighted Moynihan anonymously in *Time*; Clinton's and Moynihan's staffs distrusted each other; Moynihan's expertise was not enlisted early on; welfare should have come first. The administration's plan and tactics were hardly perfect, but then again, someone gets to set the agenda, and it might as well be the new president of the United States. Moynihan could have signed up and helped out, rather than waiting in silent anger for the pupil to visit during office hours. On welfare, Moynihan's subject of great expertise, he was right to bemoan the Republicans' drastic cuts, but was also uniquely positioned to broker a better deal. Instead he crossed his arms and played the popinjay, predicting the sinking of the ship when he might yet have grabbed an oar and started rowing.

he appeared on *Meet the Press* and proclaimed, astonishingly, that there was no health care crisis in America—

Moynihan had few major legislative accomplishments other than interstate transportation reform in 1991, and the revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington and Penn Station in New York. He belonged in the world of ideas more than anyplace else. Even though we need such people in government, it can be a frustrating arrangement. John Chafee once joked that if you wrote to Moynihan about a passport, you'd get a history of the passport office, while if you wrote to an ordinary politician, you'd get a passport. But Moynihan did write a smashing newsletter to his constituents that was candid, digressive, learned, and no doubt underappreciated. His letters reveal him most relaxed in his study, a one-room schoolhouse on his farm in upstate New York, where he clicked away at his typewriter. It would be a serious mistake to say that he should have stayed there, but it is nevertheless where he was at his best. WM

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