

American Academy of Political
And Social Science
June 2, 2011

Pat Moynihan, Where Are You When
We Really Need You?

By Daniel Rose

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose ideas and career we celebrate tonight, was a brilliant, erudite and complex thinker whose lessons we would do well to remember.

In an age of widespread “tunnel vision,” he brought to his deliberations the knowledge of institutions of a political scientist, the understanding of cultures of a sociologist, the time sense and perspective of a historian, the appreciation of data and numbers of an economist, the love of teaching of a professor, the values of a philosopher and the hard-nosed appraisal of realistic possibilities of a vote-counting politician.

Moynihan viewed cities through the lens of a master urban planner and transportation as a regional planner, studied architecture with the eye of an aesthete and historian, and he approached the subject of traffic deaths as an epidemiologist.

A true polymath, Moynihan could have echoed the great Max Weber’s irritable reply to a questioner, “What am I, a cow, that I must have ‘a field’?”

As a shrewd observer of government, he understood the destructive potential of misused “secrecy”; and he understood that the U.S. military build-up of the 1980’s was as much

designed to starve our other government expenditures as it was to frighten the Russians.

Pat felt deeply the crucial importance of a stable family, since he himself had been a middle class child fallen on hard times because of a deserting father. He never forgot the role government scholarships played in his own undergraduate and graduate degrees and foreign study.

As a wit, a master coiner of the apt phrase (“defining deviancy down” among the best) and a true son of Blarney Castle, he delighted academic and political audiences.

Above all, above all, as a Roman Catholic and FDR New Deal style Democrat and proud member of an ethnic minority, he never forgot who he was or what he stood for. That, simply stated, was an incorruptible devotion to the common good.

The Moynihan prescience was legendary; some have called it his ability to “see around corners.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, Henry Kissinger sent him the brief note, “Dear Pat, Your crystal ball was better than mine.” And his ability to spot promising young people and to advance their public careers was remarkable.

Our cars now have seat belts and padded dashboards because of him, and Washington’s Pennsylvania Avenue is now a source of national pride rather than embarrassment. With 72% of American black babies born this year to unmarried mothers and with an increasing number of white babies being born to unmarried mothers, Pat’s 1965 study, “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action,” is at last being recognized for its inspired insights.

Pat was profoundly hurt by his professional colleagues' failure to support him on the Moynihan Report. He understood the ancient Greek word "parrhesia" as "speaking the truth even at great personal risk"; but he frankly never anticipated the public firestorm or lack of professional support. Pat being Pat, he probably reflected on a similar lack of support for Giordano Bruno as he was being burned at the stake, or of Galileo as he was forced to retract.

As U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, he fervently defended American values, with the U.S. often "in opposition"; and he vigorously and eloquently attacked the concept of "Zionism is racism," to the dismay of old State Department hands, who felt he was always "rocking the boat."

Always a lover of the appropriate quotation, Pat would probably have described our current Congressional performance on the economy in William Butler Yeats' lines, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

When I first visited Pat's study in the schoolhouse in Pindars Corners, I thought of Michel de Montaigne in his tower study; when I looked out the window of the Moynihans' Washington apartment, I recalled the shabby souvenir shops and fast food stands B.M. (before Moynihan). When I taste curry, I think of the memorable party Liz and Pat threw in India to celebrate the 500th birthday of the Mughal emperor Babur (whose garden Liz discovered). When I pass Pat's favorite corner luncheon table at the Century Association, I recall his almost apoplectic anger one day at the just-released healthcare bill that Ira Magaziner had prepared (in secret hearings) for Hillary Clinton. Over 1000 pages long and fearfully complex, its provisions would devastate New

York's great teaching hospitals, Pat raged. He felt the bill was doomed to failure, and he bemoaned the fact that an important opportunity would be lost.

The fundamental importance of education had always been a major Moynihan belief, and he studied the subject carefully. James Coleman's 1966 landmark report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, blazed fresh trails; and its impact stayed with Pat permanently. Coleman's thesis, backed up by massive statistical analysis, demonstrated that money was but one of many complex factors influencing education.

Pat remained skeptical of glib theories unsupported by detailed research, and he would have cheered Diane Ravitch's courageous change of positions when research demonstrated that the excessive emphasis on charter schools and the simplistic reliance on standardized test scores advocated by the No Child Left Behind program—and previously supported by Ravitch—had become counter-productive.

Honest and dispassionate analysis of appropriate data should be the bedrock of the social sciences, Moynihan felt; and he would have been proud to see this year's Daniel Patrick Moynihan Award go to Diane Ravitch.

Diane has been a good friend of long standing, and I have followed her career closely. Her specialty could be called "America's Fruitless Search for an Educational Quick Fix."

Our society, that values vitamin pills over the full, well-balanced meal, keeps looking for an educational equivalent—some cheap, instantly-effective elixir that will transform dysfunctional children into Nobel Prize winners. And we haven't found one yet.

We refuse to acknowledge what a fiercely complex subject education is, how many factors are involved and how little we really know about them.

In 1967, for the Carnegie Foundation, Diane studied the fiasco of the Ford Foundation's intervention in the Ocean Hill/Brownsville controversy. This resulted in her classic 1974 volume *The Great School Wars*.

She later studied the history of educational fads and enthusiasms across the 20th century in a book called *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reforms*.

In her latest book, she analyzed the dubious results of the Gates, Walton and Broad Foundations' sometimes counter-productive efforts, as they still search for the one "big idea" that would turn all children into "A" students; and I have suggested that the title for her next book be *The Educational Emperors Have No Clothes*.

Diane's services to the field of education have been remarkable. The dozen books she has written (and others she edited), her term as Assistant Secretary of Education, and her countless papers, conference appearances and blogs have stimulated thinking throughout the field.

Her research is rigorous, in keeping with the Moynihan Dictum, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts."

Diane and I worked with Pat and Liz (Pat's superb campaign manager) in 1976 on Pat's first Senatorial campaign, the primary being a close race against Bella Abzug. And I am

certain that Pat, who admired Diane, would have been delighted to award this year's Moynihan prize personally to Diane Ravitch.

Daniel Rose's talks can be found on: www.danielrose.org