ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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LBJ's Great Society: Fifty Years Later

May 22, 2014, marks the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's "Great Society" address, delivered at the spring commencement for the University of Michigan. Johnson's speech remains the most ambitious call to date by any president to use the power of the national government to effect a far-reaching transformation of American society. As Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute argues, "It also stands as the high-water mark for Washington's confidence in the broad meliorative properties of government social policy, scientifically applied. No less important, the Great Society pledge, and the fruit this would ultimately bear, profoundly recast the common understanding of the ends of governance in our country. The address heralded fundamental changes—some then already underway, others still only being envisioned—that would decisively expand the scale and scope of government in American life and greatly alter the relationship between that same government and the governed in our country today. In his oration, LBJ offered a grand vision of what an American welfare state—big, generous, and interventionist—might accomplish." LBJ's Great Society, articulated in his 1964 address, promised to "end poverty and racial injustice, rebuild urban America, and enhance the hunger for community and the meaning of our lives." Because of his vision, LBJ is arguably the most consequential president of the 20th century. Indeed, as Joseph Califano, LBJ's top domestic policy adviser, said, "We are living in Lyndon Johnson's America. This country is more the country of Lyndon Johnson than any other president."

Before LBJ became president, Social Security was the only nationwide social program in America. LBJ's Great Society profoundly changed that. Here is an overview of the Great Society programs:

1. **War on Poverty**: forty programs that were intended to eliminate poverty by improving living conditions and enabling people to lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty.
2. **Education**: sixty separate bills that provided for new and better-equipped classrooms, minority scholarships, and low-interest student loans.
3. **Medicare & Medicaid**: guaranteed health care to every American over sixty-five.
4. **The Environment**: introduced measures to promote clean air and water.
5. **National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities**: program to support artists, performers, and writers.
6. **Job Corps**: provided enabling skills for young men and women.
7. **Head Start**: program for four- and five-year-old children from disadvantaged families.

Policy makers and scholars will continue to debate the ongoing effects of the Great Society on people's lives, but there are several long range effects that frame early 21st century America:

- Virtually every political battle of today has its roots in the expansion of the national government and the social experimentation that began with Johnson's programs.
- The Great Society has fostered an ongoing national debate on the proper size and role of the national government in our lives.
- The Great Society was not only a significant redistribution of wealth in America, Karen Tumulty of the *Washington Post* argues that "it was also a significant shift of power in America—from the states to the national government, from the legislative branch to the executive, from corporations to federal regulators, from big-city political machines to community groups."
- The Great Society took the national government into education at all levels. Where education was once basically a state and local function, it is now very much under the purview of the national government, which funds directly and indirectly major portions of almost every facet of education in America.

But Nicholas Eberstadt offers another evaluation of the Great Society: The social pathologies it has fostered. Three of the most disturbing of these many entangled pathologies are welfare dependency, the flight from work, and family breakdown.

- **"Welfare Dependency**. Unlike, say, an old-age pension awarded after a lifetime of work, a bestowal of charity or aid to the indigent is a transaction that establishes a relationship of dependence. As a people who have prized their independence, financial as well as political, Americans throughout history have attempted to avoid dependence on 'relief' and other handouts. Recovery from the Great Depression was corroborated by the great decline in the numbers of Americans on public aid: In 1951, the commissioner of Social Security was pleased to report that just 3.8 percent of Americans were receiving public aid, down from 11.5 percent as recently as 1940. But with the War on Poverty and its successor programs, such dependency has become routine. The United States today is richer than at any previous juncture—yet, paradoxically, more Americans than ever before are officially judged to be in need. Welfare dependence is at an all-time high and by all indications set to climb in the years ahead. Perhaps tellingly, the U.S. government did not get around to collecting data and publishing figures on the proportion of the population dependent on need-based benefits on a systematic basis until nearly two decades after the start of the War on Poverty, during the Reagan era. By then (1983), nearly one American in five (18.8 percent) lived in a home taking in one or more means-tested benefits."

  By 2012, according to one Census Bureau count, the proportion was almost one in three: 32.3 percent and "only" 29.4 percent if school lunches were excluded from the tally. This still left more than 90 million Americans applying for and accepting aid from government antipoverty programs. But only 33 million people from America's "poverty population" were enrolled in those same means-tested programs. In other words, nearly twice as many Americans above the poverty line as below it were getting antipoverty benefits. Evidently, the American welfare state has been defining deprivation upward.

  By 2012, according to one Census Bureau count, significant demographic subgroups within the American population were well along the path to means-tested majorities—that is to say, toward the point where more members than not of the groups in question would be claiming

benefits from government antipoverty programs. More than 47 percent of all black Americans and fully 48 percent of Hispanic Americans of all ages were reckoned to be taking home means-tested benefits (excluding subsidized school lunches from the tally, here and in the rest of this discussion). More than 60 percent of black and Hispanic children, and nearly 43 percent of all American children, were depending on antipoverty programs for at least some support. Dependency was less pronounced among children of Asian Americans and non-Hispanic whites, but only to a degree—for both those groups, the ratio was close to 30 percent. In all of the aforementioned cases, most of the beneficiaries drawing on government poverty program resources were men, women, and children *not* officially counted as poor.

The reach of dependence is perhaps best highlighted by its inroads into the parts of American society traditionally least ensnared by it. Historically, non-Hispanic whites have had the lowest dependence on public aid of any major racial or ethnic group delineated within official statistics—yet by 2012, nearly 1 in 5 nonpoor Anglo men ages 25-44, and about 1 in 11 under 65, nonpoor, and living alone, were on the government benefit rolls.

- **"The Flight from Work.** Although a higher fraction of Americans 20 and older are working today than at the start of the War on Poverty (61.2 percent in January 2014 versus 57.2 percent in January 1964), and though labor force participation rates are likewise higher today than 50 years ago, these overall figures mask two distinct tendencies."

  On one hand, adult women are much more likely to be working or looking for work today than two generations ago. Labor force participation rates for women 20 and older are fully 20 percentage points higher today than in early 1964 (58.6 percent in January 2014 versus 38.5 percent in January 1964). A lifestyle that includes at least some paid employment has become the norm for American women over the past two generations.

  On the other hand, men have been a diminishing presence within the workforce-and not only thanks to the rising share of women who seek to work. The proportion of men 20 and older who are employed has dramatically and almost steadily dropped since the start of the War on Poverty, falling from 80.6 percent in January 1964 to 67.6 percent 50 years later. No less remarkable: The proportion of adult men in the labor force-either working or looking for work-has likewise plunged over those same years, from 84.2 percent then to 71.9 percent today. Put another way: Our country has seen a surge of men making a complete exit from the workforce over the past 50 years. Whereas fewer than 16 percent of men 20 or older neither had work nor were looking for it in early 1964, the corresponding share today is more than 28 percent.

  In purely arithmetic terms, the main reason American men today are not working is not unemployment. Rather, it is because they have opted out of the labor market altogether. For every adult man who is between jobs and looking for new work, more than five are neither working nor looking for employment.

  Even in what should be the prime of work life, this male flight from work has been apparent. Between early 1964 and early 2014, the proportion of civilian, noninstitutionalized men

completely out of the labor force nearly quadrupled—from 3.2 percent to 12.6 percent. By the same token, the corresponding share of nonworkers for men 35-44 years of age more than tripled over those same years, from 2.5 percent in January 1964 to 9.0 percent in January 2014.

The withdrawal of progressively greater proportions of men-including relatively young men-from the U.S. workforce seems especially paradoxical when we consider the major improvements in health (as reflected in life expectancy) and educational attainment (as reflected in mean years of schooling) for the cohorts under consideration over those same years. All other things being equal, one might have assumed these changes would make men *more* capable of working, not *less.*

- **"Family Breakdown.** In the early postwar era, the norm for childbearing and child-rearing was the married two-parent household. Norm and reality were not identical, of course—but for the country as a whole, the gap was not immense. Illegitimacy was on the rise in the early postwar era, but as late as 1963, on the eve of the War on Poverty, more than 93 percent of American babies were coming into the world with two married parents. According to the 1960 census, nearly 88 percent of children under 18 were then living with two parents. That fraction was slightly higher than it had been before World War II, thanks in part to improving survival chances for parents and the correspondingly diminished risk of orphanhood."

  Unfortunately, the rise of the new welfare policies inaugurated by the War on Poverty coincided with a marked change in family formation patterns in America. Out-of-wedlock births exploded. Divorce and separation soared. The fraction of children living in two-parent homes commenced a continuing downward spiral. These new patterns are so pervasive, and so politically sensitive, that some today object even to describing the phenomenon as "family breakdown." But the phenomenon has swept through all of American society over the past 50 years, leaving no ethnic group untouched.

  By 2013, nearly 32 percent of America's children were living in arrangements other than a two-parent home. Moreover, given current trends in cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage, not all children living in two-parent homes nowadays are with both their biological parents-and even where they are, those biological parents are not always married. A Census Bureau study for 2009 reported just under 69 percent of America's children lived in two-parent homes that year-but only 60 percent were biological offspring of both parents in their home, and only 57 percent were with both married biological parents. The corresponding percentages are presumably lower today.

  The two-married-parent family construct has always been frailest among African Americans (though the reasons behind that fragility continue to be debated, sometimes rancorously). The reported illegitimacy ratio for nonwhites gradually rose from 17 percent in 1940 to 22 percent in 1959. In 1960, one in five nonwhite children was living with a lone mother. By 2012, more than 72 percent of black births were outside marriage, and in 2013 more than half of black children were living only with their mother—many more than the 37 percent who were in a two-parent home.

> The collapse of the traditional family structure has been underway among the majority population of non-Hispanic whites as well. For Anglos, there were few signs of impending family breakdown in the generation before the War on Poverty; between 1940 and 1963, the out-of-wedlock birth ratio increased, but only from 2 percent to 3 percent, and in 1960, just 6 percent of white children lived with single mothers. In 2012, the proportion of out-of-wedlock births was 29 percent--nearly 10 times as high as it was just before the War on Poverty. By 2013, more than 18 percent of Anglo children were in single-mother homes--three times the proportion before the War on Poverty--and over one-quarter lived outside two-parent homes. By 2009, less than two-thirds of Anglo children were living with both biological parents, and fewer than five out of eight were with biological parents who were married to each other. Thus, Anglo whites today register illegitimacy ratios markedly higher than those ratios were for African Americans when Moynihan called attention to the crisis in the black family--and proportions of single-parent children look eerily comparable.

See George Will in the *Washington Post* (19 May 2014); Karen Tumulty, "The Great Society at 50," in the *Washington Post* (19 May 2014); and Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Great Society at Fifty: The Triumph and the Tragedy," The American Enterprise Institute.