

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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Thirty Years in the Public Interest

A Survey of Recent Articles

The public interest," Walter Lippmann once wrote, "may be presumed to be what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently." Thirty years ago, Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell, with the assistance of fellow liberals Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, James Q. Wilson, and others, launched a quarterly journal devoted to the pursuit of the elusive thing Lippmann had described. They called the journal, naturally enough, the *Public Interest*.

Starting in the fall of 1965, Kristol and his friends served up analytical articles that were grounded in the social sciences but were clearly written and relatively free of jargon. From the outset, Kristol recalls in the 30th anniversary issue of the *Public Interest* (Fall 1995), the tone "was skeptical, pragmatic, meliorist. We were especially provoked by the widespread acceptance of left-wing sociological ideas that were incorporated in the War on Poverty." The journal served as an incubator for many of the ideas that now dominate the public agenda.

The founding fathers of the *Public Interest* were not then conservatives. They regarded the conservatism of William F. Buckley's *National Review* (founded 10 years earlier) as too anti-intellectual, too strident, and too hostile to the New Deal and the welfare state. "We were all children of the depression," Kristol writes, "most of us from lower-middle-class or working-class families, a significant number of us urban Jews for whom the 1930s had been years of desperation, and we felt a measure of loyalty to the spirit of the New Deal if not to all its programs and policies."

Even as their disenchantment with Pres-

ident Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs grew, the student rebellion and emerging counterculture of the 1960s made the *Public Interest* intellectuals feel, and seem, more conservative than they had anticipated. Michael Harrington, the socialist author of *The Other America* (1962), contemptuously branded Kristol and his ilk "neoconservatives," and the label stuck. Kristol embraced it; others, such as Daniel Bell (who considers himself "a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture"), did not. (Bell departed the *Public Interest* 10 years after its founding, and was succeeded as Kristol's coeditor by Nathan Glazer.)

Initially, a "neoconservative" was distinguished from a "conservative" mainly by the former's attachment to the traditional welfare state. In time, however, as that attachment eroded, so did the distinction. Both traditional conservatives and many neoconservatives backed Ronald Reagan for the presidency in 1980, and, after his election, a merger began to take place. They are all, or almost all, "conservatives" now. (And the *Public Interest* is in Washington, D.C., having moved from New York in 1987.) In the 30th anniversary issue, Kristol and other of the journal's stalwarts look back, around, and ahead.

Not only no longer inclined to defend the traditional welfare state, most of the *Public Interest* intellectuals now seem to regard it, in columnist Charles Krauthammer's words, as "a primary cause of the decline of society's mediating institutions," especially the family. Even more striking is how many of the contributors to this eminent public policy journal are now concerned with culture, and even religion.

Reining in the welfare state, Krauthammer says, is only a first step. The “degraded” mass culture is another source of decay.

Kristol, noting that religious conservatism has become an active political force, writes: “We have lived through a century of ever more extreme hedonism, antinomianism, personal and sexual individualism, licentiousness . . . and no one who has bothered to read a bit of history ought to be surprised if it culminates in some kind of aggressive religious awakening.”

Krauthammer, however, is doubtful that, in an age of science and material abundance, the religious revival now under way can prevail. If not, he says, revitalizing civil society will require “the more coercive and less reliable agency of politics.”

Some key tenets of the *Public Interest* thinkers have been vindicated by the experience of the last 30 years. Writes James Q. Wilson, author of *Thinking about Crime* (1975) and many other books: “Except for a handful of American professors, everyone here and abroad now recognizes that capitalism produces greater material abundance for more people than any other economic system ever invented. The evidence is not in dispute. A series of natural experiments were conducted on a scale that every social scientist must envy: Several nations—China, Germany, Korea, and Vietnam—were sawed in two, and capitalism was installed in one part and ‘socialism’ in the other. In every case, the capitalist part outproduced, by a vast margin, the noncapitalist one.” Capitalism also, he adds, seems to be a necessary (but not sufficient) precondition for democracy.

Capitalism does have costs, he admits. “For people worried about inequality or environmental degradation, the question is not whether capitalism has consequences but whether its consequences are better or worse than those of some *feasible* economic alternative.” It’s not fair to measure capitalist reality against socialist (or communitarian or cooperative) ideals, Wilson says. And the costs of capitalism must be weighed against its benefits.

Honest socialists who make those calculations may discover, with Nathan Glazer, that “nothing . . . concentrates the mind on an issue more sharply than discovering one has been wrong about it.” He is referring to his

own conviction 20 years ago that, thanks to the civil-rights revolution, residential integration of black and white Americans would naturally take place as the economic circumstances of blacks improved and their political power increased. “The sharp decline in the racist sentiments of the American population in the past 30 years . . . has done remarkably little to change the overall pattern of black concentration, of black isolation from the rest of the population,” he notes. Can anything be done? “The history of policy efforts to integrate neighborhoods and communities has been one of many schemes, and extended and endless litigation, and very small successes.” Massive government programs are still not the answer, he concludes. Residential integration will have to come about through “individual and voluntaristic” efforts.

Another *Public Interest* contributor, Glenn C. Loury, a professor of economics at Boston University, similarly finds that “race-conscious public action” is not the right answer to persistent racial inequality. “I submit . . . that establishing the color-blind principle is the *only* way to secure lasting civic equality for the descendants of slaves,” he writes.

Charles Murray, author of *Losing Ground* (1984) and co-author of *The Bell Curve* (1994), has written much about the underclass but this time offers what he considers good news for many Americans outside the underclass, including those in what has been called the “overclass.” Intellectual and cultural hostility to marriage has diminished; it is more acceptable for a woman to stay at home with her young children, and secondary education has become more demanding. In the near future, the aging tenured radicals in the universities will increasingly become figures of fun, and the postmodernism there probably will pass out of fashion. The baby boomers soon will be entering their fifties, and they are likely to become more religious as they grow older.

For these and other reasons, Murray believes, there is in the works nothing less than “the restoration of a culture in which family, parenthood, the life of the mind, morality, and the virtues are all perceived and valued in ways that our grandparents would find familiar.” Somehow, he says, the rest of the country, too, must eventually come to take part in this restoration. The public interest requires it.