

mentation, contends McClay, a Tulane University historian.

Experiment “is always related to some specific end, some well-defined goal, some truth, hypothesis, pattern, or principle to be confirmed or disconfirmed,” he says, and effective scientific experimentation “always seeks to identify, understand, and harness the laws of nature, not transform or obliterate those laws.” And in that sense, McClay observes, America at the outset was indeed an experiment. As Alexander Hamilton wrote in *The Federalist*, it “seemed to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”

By 1838, when Abraham Lincoln gave his celebrated address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, McClay argues, the results of the original American experiment were in. The government, Lincoln said, had been “felt by all to be an undecided experiment; now it is understood to be a successful one,” having conclusively proved “the capability of a people to govern themselves.” Twenty-five years later, at

Gettysburg, he famously observed that the Civil War was “testing” whether the result of this successful experiment “can long endure.”

Change is a constant, of course, and Americans have striven to have their nation live up more faithfully to its professed ideals, particularly with regard to the treatment of black Americans, McClay notes. “But the question is whether everything is therefore to be open to transformation. . . . It is one thing to argue that the experiment needs to be conducted more faithfully and quite another to say that it needs to be redefined or junked altogether.” Indeed, he writes, love of country “is incompatible with the idea of America as an open-ended social experiment, an entity yet to be achieved, in which all options are open, all traditions subject to dissolution, and all claims revocable.” In that case, only “the narcissistic self” finally matters.

The experiment of America is meaningless, McClay writes, “unless it is undertaken for the sake . . . of those convictions, beliefs, and fundamental commitments embodied in the term ‘ordered liberty.’” The great challenge—the great *experiment*—today, he concludes, is to recover the “framework of meaning” in Western civilization that allowed those cherished ideals to flourish.

Compassion Rationed

“Relatively Disabled” by F. D. Reeve, in *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Summer 1998), Univ. of Michigan, Rm. 3032, Rackham Bldg., 915 E. Washington St., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109–1070.

Ever since his son was thrown from a horse and left paralyzed from the neck down in the spring of 1995, poet and essayist Reeve has learned how not only the disabled themselves but their relatives and close friends must struggle against a loss of personal identity.

Within days of the accident, not only neighbors but casual acquaintances and even total strangers began approaching the author to inquire about his son Christopher’s health. Though they were often sincerely sympathetic, Reeve says, it soon became apparent that they did not want to know about the reality of his son’s “personal, day-after-day suffering—how precarious his life was, how his health fluctuated, how close he came to death in the hospital and has come afterward as well.” Instead, Reeve says, they wanted the TV version of the plight of the actor who played Superman. “They wanted to hear about his

televised role as sufferer—his fight against unconquerable odds—and I, important to them only as ‘Superman’s Father,’ was expected to assure them that the fight was still going on.”

The actor’s fans do not realize, Reeve says, “how they’re discriminating against—that is, denying individual identity to—an individual father and son struggling to maintain a difficult relationship in the face of differing values and overwhelming physical problems. In Christopher’s case, the role of ‘handicapped Superman’ has taken the place of reality. If I refuse to be de-individualized, or if I insist on mentioning the misery and hardship that my son feels daily—he who can never be alone, who must be wakened and turned every couple of hours during the night—I become a nay-sayer to the image of which he has become custodian.”

“Public stereotyping of the deaf is no less discriminatory,” adds Reeve, whose wife, Laura Stevenson, a novelist-professor, is deaf. He says, “I’ve learned that while people will go out of their way to help a person in a wheelchair, they assume that someone they can’t talk to is stupid, perhaps retarded, definitely to be avoided.” Reeve was incredulous at first when his wife told him how she was treated. But after frequently “witnessing people coldly leaving her out of the conversation—even at the faculty lunch tables in her

own college—I admit it’s true.” Moreover, he says, “people who talk to me when I meet them by myself cut me out, too, when she and I are together.”

“Everything in American media encourages people” to respond to the disabled by stereotyping them, writes Reeve. “The difference between admiring a deaf professor’s ‘courage’ or a Superman’s ‘good fight’ and developing flexible, compassionate understanding of L. Stevenson or of C. Reeve is *thought*.”

The Other Welfare Reform

“A Liberal in Wolf’s Clothing: Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan in the Light of 1990s Welfare Reform” by Alex Waddan, in *Journal of American Studies* (Aug. 1998), Cambridge Univ. Press, Journals Dept., 40 W. 20th St., New York, N.Y. 10011-4211.

Liberals still distressed by President Bill Clinton’s 1996 action ending “welfare as we know it” ought to turn their minds back to 1969, when they (or their predecessors) succeeded in defeating President Richard Nixon’s plan to overhaul welfare. That was when liberals muffed their big chance, argues Waddan, who teaches at the University of Sunderland, in England.

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—which, though Clinton signed it, was largely the work of congressional Republicans—turned welfare into a program of fixed block grants, gave states much discretion over how they spend the money, imposed a tough work requirement, and set a time limit of five years on any individual’s receipt of welfare.

Consider now President Nixon’s 1969 proposal. Called the Family Assistance Plan, it offered a national guarantee of an income of \$1,600 (about \$6,800 in 1996 dollars) for a family of four with the qualification that the head of the household was making a genuine effort to find or hold down a job. The welfare plan would also function as a wage supplement for the working poor, enabling such families to continue receiving benefits, on a diminishing scale, up to a total household income of \$3,920.

Nixon wrapped his plan in conservative rhetoric, particularly stressing work as an antidote to poverty. Many liberals, observes Waddan, took the president at his public word, or pretended to do so. Former vice president Hubert Humphrey dismissed Nixon’s plan as “nothing new, nothing star-

ting.” Liberals railed against the plan’s supposedly inadequate base income—\$1,600 for a family of four was well below the poverty line—and supposedly punitive work requirement. They failed to see, Waddan argues, that an income program integrating the working poor with single “welfare mothers” who did not work would be less vulnerable to criticism than the existing welfare system serving chiefly the latter group. Perhaps blinded by antipathy toward Nixon, liberals refused to grasp the possibility that once the new program was established, benefits could subsequently be expanded.

Many liberals, Waddan says, apparently made little effort to understand Nixon’s plan. George Wiley, executive director of the National Welfare Rights Organization, for instance, charged that it “discriminates against black people.” But black welfare recipients in eight southern states would have seen their benefits increase, and the other states were supposed to make up any decrease in benefits.

Nixon’s plan passed the House of Representatives but then died in the Senate Finance Committee, where liberals such as Eugene McCarthy and Fred Harris joined conservatives in the kill.

Conservative critics claimed that a guaranteed minimum income would be a disincentive to work. The American Conservative Union complained that Nixon had proposed “a far more liberal welfare program than any Democrat ever dared.” Thirty years later, that historical generalization now has the ring of prophecy.