



From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism

Gareth Davies

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"The purpose of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 is to offer opportunity, not an opiate. . . . We are not content to accept the endless growth of relief rolls or welfare rolls." President Lyndon B. Johnson

"I would just provide that every person in this country is given a certain minimum income. If he wants to work in addition to that, he keeps what he earns." Senator George S. McGovern

Between LBJ's statement in 1964 and McGovern's in 1972, American liberals radically transformed their welfare philosophy from one founded on opportunity and hard work to one advocating automatic entitlements. Gareth Davies' book shows us just how far-reaching that transformation was and how much it has to teach anyone engaged in the latest round of debates over welfare reform in America.

When Lyndon Johnson declared a "War on Poverty," he took great care to align his ambitious program with national attitudes toward work, worthiness, and dependency. Eight years later, however, American liberals were dominated by those who believed that all citizens enjoyed an unqualified right to income support with no strings or obligations attached. That shift, Davies argues, was part of a broader transformation in political values that had devastating consequences for the Democratic Party in particular and for the cause of liberalism generally.

Davies shows how policy failure, the war in Vietnam, domestic violence, and the struggle for black equality combined to create a crisis in national politics that destroyed the promise of the Great Society. He reevaluates LBJ's role, demonstrating that while detractors such as McGovern and Robert Kennedy embraced the "new politics of dissent," LBJ remained true throughout his career to the values that had sustained the New Deal coalition and that continued to retain their mass appeal.

Davies also explains in rich detail how the dominant strain of American liberalism came to abandon individualism, one of the nation's dogmas, thus shattering the New Deal liberal hegemony with consequences still affecting American politics in the mid 1990s. Placing today's welfare debates within this historical context, Davies shows that the current emphasis on work and personal responsibility is neither a liberal innovation nor distinctively conservative.

Based on a wide range of previously untapped archival sources and presented in a very accessible style, *From Opportunity to Entitlement* will be especially useful for courses concerned with the 1960s, the decline of the New Deal political order, the history of social welfare, the American reform tradition, and the influence of race upon American politics.

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