

GREAT SOCIETY: A NEW HISTORY

(AMITY SHLAES)

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A few weeks ago, I watched *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, and Quentin Tarantino's movie delivered to me what I have been seeking. Namely, the exact point America careened off the path to flourishing, abandoning our long, mostly successful search for ever-increasing excellence and achievement. It was 1969. As the shadows lengthen and the darkness spreads, perhaps it does not matter when twilight fell. But why twilight fell does matter, and much of the answer can be found in the pages of Amity Shlaes's new book, *Great Society*, which narrates the decade's massive expansion of government, and of elite power, all in the service of the Left, that we were told was certain to give us Utopia, but instead destroyed our civilization.

That America was being destroyed was not completely obvious at the time. In fact, America sixty years ago could absorb a lot of abuse—until the early 1970s America still seemed mostly on track, just more colorful around the edges, as shown in Tarantino's movie. In it, the older America, of a sense of duty and a desire for achievement, tempered by human foibles, is contrasted with the new America, of thieving, murderous hippies, emancipated from unchosen bonds by the social changes imposed on us during the 1960s, and acting badly, as men and women always do when so emancipated. A society composed of such cannot succeed or accomplish anything at all, something known to wise men throughout all ages, but which we were made to forget, to our harm and sorrow.

The movie ends differently than real life—in real life, the hippies won, and as a result we have accomplished nothing of any importance since 1969. Do not forget—it has been fifty-one years since 1969, when we landed men on the Moon, and 1969 was sixty-six years after men first flew. Compare the eras, and weep, for we now know that 1969 was our apogee, and that ever since, we have blindly stumbled along a crooked path that leads nowhere. But in failure lies opportunity. I think that if we play it right, the 1960s will merely have been a detour off the path. We can now return to the straight path—but only if we have the will to make hard choices, to sell the present, for a time, to pay for our future.

As the Wuhan virus spreads through our hollowed-out society, perhaps, indeed, now is the time. We will see.

That the 1960s spelled the effective end of America is not, to the perceptive, news. In fact, it is apparently the subject of two recent books I have not yet read, though I will: Ross Douthat's *The Decadent Society* and Christopher Caldwell's *Age of Entitlement*. But those are books pitched to a small audience, and most Americans, even today, live under a spell. For fifty years, our ruling class has used their control of education and televisual media to indoctrinate our children and hoodwink our adults by painting an utterly false picture of the 1960s. The party line has been that the decade was a shining time for America, when we overthrew old verities and emancipated everyone in society, resulting in a coruscating new dawn of liberty for America. And by unfortunate coincidence, our elites had, and gladly used, a peerless tool to silence objections, because it was in the 1960s that African Americans, the sole American group worthy of any type of emancipation or the subject of any relevant and unjust oppression in American history, actually got the civil rights promised them in 1865. This allowed any objection to any aspect of the Left edifice built in the 1960s to be cast as racism and ignored—which it still is today, hugely reinforced by new, malicious Left doctrines such as intersectionality, thereby creating the very real risk of racial conflict in any American rebirth. I do not have a solution for that, yet.

On to the book. Shlaes is known as a historian of the early twentieth century. Her biography of Calvin Coolidge and her history of the Great Depression (*The Forgotten Man*) are modern classics. This is straight history with no ideological overlay. Shlaes is not really here to criticize the 1960s, or their most visible manifestation, the so-called Great Society. Yes, the hubris of the men at the nation's helm is on pristine display, but Shlaes presents the facts almost without comment, letting the reader draw his own conclusions.

The author organizes her chapters by short periods, months or years. She also pulls through certain themes, among them the television series *Bonanza*, which first aired at the turn of the decade, and went off the air a few years into the 1970s. *Bonanza*, reruns of which I watched with my grandfather as a child, was an optimistic show, reflecting an optimistic America—one where anything could be accomplished with hard work and the right attitude, most of all knowing and doing one's duty. In 1960,

Americans correctly perceived themselves as strong and the federal government, which had vastly less reach than today and directly touched the average American's life nearly not at all, as a partner in continuing that strength. Big business, labor, and the government openly cooperated to everyone's perceived benefit. True, there was always some tension about how the pie got distributed, with intermittent conflicts between labor and management, and fears in many quarters that socialism was lurking just around the corner. In 1960 through 1962, there were some rumblings of economic discontent, and, almost unnoticed, the pernicious adoption by President Kennedy of an executive order allowing government employees to unionize. But there was little to suggest new problems ahead.

Trouble was being brewed by the Left, though. Of course, the Left had long been striving to get a grip on America, but had never managed to dominate even the most obvious areas, such as factory workers. The unions were, in fact, mostly ferociously anti-Communist, and a key part of the necessary and heroic suppression by Americans of Communism during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Realizing this, the traditional American hard Left had switched to dominating the culture, the institutions, and morphed into the New Left. Shlaes acknowledges this was a multi-decade program of the Left: "The 'long march through the institutions' that Antonio Gramsci sketched out and Rudi Dutschke demanded had succeeded." (In America, this was the project of the infamous Frankfurt School; I have covered that history elsewhere.) In effect, therefore, this book is a history of how the New Left took power, and ruined America.

Shlaes focuses on the Port Huron meeting of June 1962, which sowed the seeds of much of the rest of the decade. Port Huron was a meeting of well-to-do young New Left activists, organized and paid for by the United Auto Workers, naively eager to enlist young people in the goal of helping keep the pie properly divided. Politics was nothing new for the great union leaders, such as Walter Reuther, but what the UAW and its elders did not realize is that the young leftists they recruited believed pies grew on trees, and anyway were less interested in pies, and more interested in destruction of the American system and its replacement by something entirely new. The older American Left, exemplified by Reuther, wanted social democracy in the European mold. The New

Left wanted, as the ideological Left has always wanted since the 1700s, a complete reworking of society to achieve a new, utopian paradise of justice and equality. But Reuther and his compatriots could not see this.

The degeneration heralded by the New Left did not manifest itself into sudden existence, it had long been in preparation, and had multiple parents, not just the Frankfurt School. It began in earnest sixty years before, among the Progressives who rejected America and demanded its replacement by a technocracy. Such men took advantage of, in sequence, crises to implement their vision—first World War I, then the Depression, then World War II. To the observant, by the 1960s signs of the rot created by the Left were all around, from the destruction of classical architecture to the perversions of higher education William F. Buckley called out in *God and Man at Yale*. The clear-eyed among us, such as Ronald Reagan, warned us, but even then, the elite rained contempt on Reagan and his message, thereby strengthening those actively seeking to undermine America.

Why the Left has the will and ability to execute such a strategy over a century and the Right has, so far, not, is a topic for another time. But that reality is on full display in this history, beginning with the Presidency of John Kennedy. It was those young Port Huron-type leftists, along with their slightly older leaders, such as Michael Harrington, who in 1961 quickly began to strongly influence the direction of America. Kennedy surrounded himself with men who were open to left-wing goals, and insufferably utopian, though most were still not wholly of the New Left. (Shlaes narrates how an obsessive topic of discussion among Kennedy's White House staff, immediately after Kennedy's inauguration, was wondering how they would spend their time in the last two years of Kennedy's term, after they had solved all the nation's problems during the first two years). But when Kennedy was shot, and Johnson came to power, it immediately became clear that Johnson wanted nothing more than huge federal programs, in the mold of the New Deal, only bigger and better, to cement his legacy—programs that the Left, with its infrastructure in waiting, could and did easily use for their own purposes.

Shlaes deftly sketches Johnson's tools—his solid Democratic majorities in Congress, his own political abilities, the manufactured sense of emergency used to circumvent democratic checks (always a favorite tool of the Left). We go through 1964, with a cast of characters once famous

who have now left the stage—everyone from Daniel Patrick Moynihan to Sargent Shriver. Right off the bat Johnson and the men who advised him rammed through massive “anti-poverty” legislation based on New Left principles. In November, Johnson was elected to the Presidency in his own right by a landslide. This cemented Johnson’s desire and ability to execute the now-named Great Society, which meant fountains of cash distributed at all levels (along with many other pernicious non-monetary changes, such as huge increases in legal immigration). One level was the federal government, where massive new programs sprouted like weeds. But a second level was handouts of tax dollars to states, most of all to large cities, where poverty and Democrats were concentrated. Shlaes goes into great detail about these various programs, everything from the massive new housing developments to Head Start. Some of the mayors, especially Republican mayors, resented that the price of free money from Washington was toeing the line that Washington set, but they had no real choice, and Johnson’s compliant Congress changed the laws whenever necessary to ensure that local control was a mere fiction. And a side effect of money sluicing down from, and controlled from, above was more erosion of America’s intermediary institutions, a bulwark against leftist domination, but already in decline due to government expansion of previous decades.

These Great Society programs all had as a primary goal the funding of the Left as an institution, and were the beginning of the massive self-sustaining ecosystem of the modern Left, where to this day enormous sums flow from government, business, and private individuals and entities to fund a galaxy of leftist pressure groups. In 1965, for example, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago was handed money for a “community action program” to hire one thousand full-time “community action representatives” at a salary of \$4,070 each (about \$35,000 today). Such “representatives” were instructed from Washington, in the form of a 262-page book that encouraged organizing the poor to protest to demand handouts, using the techniques pioneered by Saul Alinsky. (In later years, an ambitious young man, growing up in Hawaii, would move to Chicago and slot himself directly into this by-then long-existing ecosystem, ultimately leveraging it to make himself President.) This funding and support has always been lacking on the Right, which is a problem the Right must solve in order to achieve any of its goals.

Shlaes also touches on the importance of the radical leftist judiciary in cementing the Great Society, creating law out of whole cloth that fit with the ideology being implemented. Such decisions included *Goldberg v. Kelly*, deeming government handouts a property right; *Reynolds v. Sims*, rewriting the Constitution to ensure states with big cities were ruled by those cities; and many other Supreme Court decisions. And on a lower level, thousands of suits were brought by the government-funded Legal Services Corporation, created to serve the poor in their minor disputes such as divorces and property, but weaponized to instead frustrate any legislative choice that did not conform to the goals of the Left, and still used for that purpose (joined today by nearly all the top law firms in America). Such domination of the judiciary by the Left, on display most recently in the practice of federal district judges immediately blocking any action by Donald Trump not approved by the Left by issuing illegitimate nationwide injunctions, is another major problem blocking future Right victories. Only by crushing such Left judicial opposition, and restoring the federal judiciary to its proper extremely modest role, or by having Right judges finally use their power in the same way as Left judges have for sixty years, can the Right win.

Meanwhile, Tom Hayden and other firebrands of the New Left were moving even further leftward, unhappy that the Great Society was not radical enough. In 1965 and 1966, openly supporting Communism in North Vietnam became the new chic, and Hayden and his compatriots traveled to North Vietnam, receiving the usual Potemkin village treatment and eagerly believing the lies they were fed. (Later, Hayden and his wife Jane Fonda would name their son after a Vietnamese Communist assassin who had tried to kill Robert McNamara by bombing a bridge over which his motorcade was to pass.) This drove a wedge between the leftists in the White House and the even more radical set outside it, but also ensured that further movement Left continued, as the younger generation of leftists replaced the older.

Soon enough, no surprise, it became evident that the desired and expected utopian results, by whatever measure, were not forthcoming. The poor were worse off and violence among the poor swept the nation. This frustrated Johnson and all the men surrounding him, so he turned to housing, in 1966 and 1967. The result, in an explicit attempt to achieve "human flourishing," was disaster, with the building of massive

Le Corbusier-inspired tower blocks of public housing that immediately become festering hellholes, such as Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, which Shlaes profiles up to its demolition in 1972. Meant as a utopian solution that would prevent rioting by the dissatisfied poor, such housing instead exacerbated the Great Society's destruction of black communities. And such housing, long a pet project of the Left in its desire to remake human nature and create "scientific" solutions to intractable problems, would have been even more widespread and destructive, were it not for the efforts of people like Jane Jacobs. (Nowadays, bizarrely, we are often told that such public housing projects were the acts of racist conservatives, in an act of historical mendacity that would be breathtaking were it not the norm for Left "history.")

Among all this, Shlaes covers the rise of inflation and the move away from the gold standard, along with other economic matters, as the socialism of the Great Society inevitably led to stagflation. She narrates Johnson's choice not to run again, and how the cultivation of the New Left in the early 1960s resulted in the takeover of the Democratic party by the New Left at the end of the 1960s. She talks about the sclerosis in the once-peerless American auto industry (and other heavy industries), and the effect this had on the labor/management cooperation found earlier in the decade. Wound in between are what are now commonplace government behaviors, then new: massively underestimating the costs of government programs; using word salads and names as propaganda; ignoring regulatory costs on society; failing to perform, or care in any way about, cost-benefit analysis. We are used to it all now, just as a man living next to an open sewer becomes inured to the stench, but Shlaes does a good job narrating how it all came into existence.

It is particularly interesting that Shlaes discusses a document written by Moynihan, 1962's "Guiding Principles of Federal Architecture." In itself, this one-page memo was not particularly objectionable, but its call for "efficient and economical facilities" combined with a call for "contemporary architects" to direct the federal government's buildings, not vice versa, resulted in hundreds of billions of dollars of ugly federal architecture. This did not have to be, but was inevitable in context because of the pernicious dominance of architectural Modernism. Shlaes's mention of this memo is interesting because only a few weeks ago, this now completely obscure document was prominent again,

when it was leaked that the Trump administration was considering, after sixty years, revising this document to call for a return to classical architecture. The usual suspects shrieked “fascism!”, and nothing has been done yet, but I certainly hope it will—though it needs to be part of a much larger and comprehensive rework of the federal government, of which new architecture will be a key demonstrative element.

By the time Nixon took over in 1969, the cracks were starting to show, but Nixon eagerly continued Johnson’s policies, and often expanded them. In part this was because he didn’t much care for domestic policy (Shlaes quotes him after his 1962 gubernatorial loss, “At least I’ll never have to talk about crap like dope addiction again”); in part this was simply adherence to leftist pieties that had already addicted the mainstream of the Republican party. (George Romney, Mitt Romney’s father, features frequently in this book as an eager toady to the Left, just like his son is today.) Nixon, in fact, tried to expand the Great Society to include a universal basic income, and fell just short, because Vietnam and the fact the Left had hated Nixon for decades for his anti-Communism precluded the lockstep forced cooperation that had allowed the early Great Society to be rammed through by Johnson—not to mention the economy was not doing well, and the feeling of shared prosperity had already, not coincidentally, begun to disappear.

Shlaes ends with the beginning of stagflation and the end of the gold standard, with, shades of Donald Trump, Nixon agitating against the Federal Reserve’s unwillingness to loosen the money supply to help his re-election. Of course, one immediate result of the Great Society was economic catastrophe in the 1970s. Shlaes nods to this, although it is outside the scope of the book proper. That was, ultimately, however, the least important effect of the Great Society. Its most important effect was to encourage the undeserving to believe they are being unjustly denied what belongs to them, while denying that any person has any duty that counterbalances freedom. This fragmented our society, and thereby destroyed the unity and purpose that made it possible for America to accomplish great things.

All this is a sad history, but instructive. A basic principle of mine, and of Foundationalism, is that a well-run government should have limited ends and unlimited means. Because elites love power, and rotten elites love power dearly for what it can give them that they cannot

earn, expansion of government in practice means expansion of ends. So it was with us, but worse, since our elites combined love of power with a noxious and wholly destructive ideology. The answer is not incremental changes; it is to defenestrate our entire ruling class and strip the Left permanently of its money and power, by almost any means necessary; then to rebuild a virtuous society that takes advantage of America's unique history and place in the world, and what I believe is still a unique attitude among many of its people. With a new ruling class organically arising from the most talented and dedicated, combined with a complete restructuring of education, the termination of any unearned benefit (especially one based on any immutable characteristic), the sharp restriction of the franchise to those with an actual stake in society, and other radical changes, we may have a chance. I have been saying for some time that history will return. 2020 is looking like the year; let's take advantage of it, for as Lenin said, "Timing is all."