

A Report From Joe Ryan-Hume (University of Glasgow): EAAS Postgraduate Travel Grant Recipient 2015

The EAAS Travel Grant enabled me to spend five weeks in Washington DC, based at the Library of Congress (LOC) on a daily basis. My research findings at the LOC were fundamental to the development of a thesis chapter, which could only be completed with access to specific manuscript collections and digitized databases; the only institution to house comprehensive access to them both.

I am a current third-year Ph.D. student based in the Department of History at the University of Glasgow. My thesis questions the notion of conservative ascendancy and the so-called 'Reagan revolution' in 1980s America by reinterpreting the impact of liberalism at the time. By thoroughly examining how liberals functioned both within and distinct from the Democratic Party in opposition, I intend to dispel the argument that the history of 1980s liberalism is one of incompetence and ineffectiveness. Instead, I will highlight how the networks that formed and developed whilst in opposition helped liberals attain success at state and congressional level, as well as facilitate Bill Clinton's subsequent presidential triumph in 1992. Furthermore, as this is the era in which Barack Obama – at the time an organiser for Ralph Nader's Public Interest Group – and many of the President's allies became politically active, it would be impossible to understand the present administration's historic ascension without an examination of the political environment that first nurtured Obama and his cohort.

In order to effectively survey liberalism during this tumultuous decade, a section of my thesis focuses on Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY.), a liberal champion and vocal critic of the Reagan administration. From an examination of my initial research, completed whilst a 2014 John W. Kluge fellow at the LOC, it became clear that Moynihan played a crucial role in protecting liberalism's brightest jewel, Social Security, from conservative dissection. With a case study titled '*Social Security and the 1982 Midterms*', I sought to use the collections at the LOC to show how and why a strong liberal defence of Social Security in 1982, driven by Moynihan in the Senate and supplemented by the activism of liberal interest groups, dissuaded the Reagan administration from attempting major revisions and had a dramatic impact on the 1982 midterms.

Indeed, Senator Moynihan's personal papers are housed at the LOC and excavating through these during my research visit, from his correspondence, speeches, and

legislative files to his various press releases and personally penned notes, allowed me to effectively pinpoint the exact moment a successful liberal backlash to a key facet of Reagan's conservative agenda started to take hold. By determining the various strategies that were implemented in order to do so, my research findings highlighted that by exploiting the Social Security issue, liberals effectively regained ideological control of the House of Representatives following the 1982 midterms. Moynihan, alongside Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill, literally took the Social Security issue and ran with it, slowly gaining much needed ground on the political terrain of domestic issues. Using online resources, particularly the Congressional Record and CQ Press, allowed me to discover how the Social Security issue reshaped the contours of Reagan's America and slowed the pace of the 'Reagan Revolution' steam train. Alongside this, I was able to use contemporary newspaper and magazine clippings to reinforce the findings from the Moynihan papers and Congressional collections. Gathering this information has helped me to map out how and why liberals were able to gain such political traction on an issue seen by conservatives to epitomise the supposedly elephantine, bloated nature of the federal government. By discovering some of the varied strategies implemented in order to save Social Security from the conservative chopping board, this research has greatly improved the range and depth of my thesis.

The lack of access to such varied materials at The University of Glasgow hindered the progression of this research beforehand – not only through an inability to consult the primary sources stored at the LOC, but the university's library does not have access or subscriptions to most digitized American newspaper databases for example. Thus, the EAAS Grant allowed me to carry out all of the research required for this chapter over a five-week period. I sub-rented a room on Capitol Hill, walked by Thomas Walter's famous dome every morning, and immersed myself in the politics of Washington in the balmy summer of 2015.

The majority of my findings regarding Moynihan and the Social Security battle of the early 1980s will be published in my thesis, which has the working title 'Standing in Reagan's Shadow: Liberal Strategies in a Conservative Age.' The overall range and depth of this thesis has benefited greatly from the EAAS Grant and the consequential research period in Washington, both allowing me to precisely determine the role liberals played in influencing policy, as on Social Security, as well as enabling me to initially uncover some of the networks and organisational strategies that developed to ensure success whilst in opposition. Finally, alongside supporting me to further develop a key analytical aspect of my PhD, my time at the LOC enabled me to begin

work on a paper based on my research for consideration in a number of high-impact journals.

Joe Ryan-Hume
The University of Glasgow