When Neil Klugman, the protagonist of Philip Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus*, travels in pursuit of Brenda Patimkin up from working-class Newark to the village of Short Hills, New Jersey, his journey dramatizes some of the core premises of the culture of postwar liberalism. Passing beyond “the packed-in tangle of railroad crossings, switchmen shacks, lumber yards, Dairy Queens, and used-car lots”¹ that surround Newark, Neil leaves behind the industrial city and arrives in a world of miraculous abundance, where “fruit grew in . . . [the] refrigerator and sporting goods dropped from the trees.”² At once lustfully “acquisitive” and ironically self-aware, young Neil can’t help thinking himself “closer to heaven.”³

But, of course, that impression is not to last. Roth’s protagonist soon realizes the impermanence of suburban wealth. His true satisfactions, the novella suggests, will not be found in the “pursuit and clutching” that Brenda embodies, but in the duty represented by his work as a librarian serving the African American youth of Newark and his effort, in fulfilling the mission, to contest the conservatism of his bureaucratic superiors.⁴ This is the particular combination that makes Neil a paradigmatic figure of the postwar liberal imagination: the keen awareness of quotidian abundance, the civic-minded disdain for mere consumerism, the struggle against restrictive bureaucracy, and the mission to bring his talents to a disenfranchised public. An ambitious young man with a college education, Neil encounters a world where even the children of working-class Jews can expect to enter a thriving middle class. But it is crucial to his self-realization that this world elicits in him a desire for values that seem deeper than “money and comfort” and that such values will be realized in a career that combines appreciation for elite cultural expression with a self-conscious mission of service to the nation’s most marginalized population.⁵ Roth’s novella ends with Neil staring at his reflection in Harvard’s Widener Library and dreaming of throwing a rock through the window – as if to free both himself and the wisdom trapped inside the library walls.
for greater purposes. Neil Klugman is on his way to becoming a Kennedy liberal.

Indeed, in some respects, Neil appears quite similar to the contemporary man described by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as “the archetypal new frontiersman.” Looking back on the Kennedy years from the vantage of the mid-1960s, Schlesinger thought the true spirit of the Kennedy administration was best displayed by Richard Goodwin, the assistant special counsel to the president, who had first joined the Kennedy campaign as a junior speechwriter.\(^6\) Like Roth’s protagonist, Goodwin was a second-generation heir to aspiring Jewish immigrants. Just two years older than Roth, Goodwin, too, had grown up in a working-class family during the Depression and had found a path to success through his accomplishments in school. Having graduated from Tufts University summa cum laude, Goodwin attended Harvard Law on scholarship, graduating first in his class and going on to clerk for Felix Frankfurter at the Supreme Court. (Goodwin later described Harvard as “one of the great agents of upward mobility in this country.”\(^7\) ) His accomplishments brought the young man to the attention of then senator John F. Kennedy, who a few years later would recruit Goodwin to his presidential campaign and then to his administration. There Goodwin would play a role in shaping Kennedy’s Latin American policy and his developing ideas about federal support for the arts. Following Kennedy’s assassination, Goodwin would go on to join Lyndon Johnson’s White House as chief speechwriter, where he would play a part in influencing Johnson’s commitment to civil rights and his declaration of a War on Poverty. It was Goodwin who coined Johnson’s phrase “Great Society” and who helped lead Johnson’s investment in “community action,” the most celebrated and ultimately most controversial aspect of the War on Poverty.

For Schlesinger, Goodwin’s very ability to leap from one arena to the next in the effort to craft programs that would serve the public good was the quality that most defined him as an exemplary figure of Kennedy liberalism. “A man of uncommon intelligence,” Goodwin was, in Schlesinger’s account, one of the elite few who conducted “the currents of vitality [that] radiated out of the White House . . . and created a vast sense of possibility” throughout the nation.\(^8\) In particular, Schlesinger emphasized, Goodwin was not a party politician or a bureaucrat. He was rather a “supreme generalist” whose rare intellectual gifts enabled him to “resist specialization.”\(^9\)

Goodwin agreed. Indeed, by his account, the struggle against the deadening grip of bureaucracy was the key theme of JFK’s presidency. Praising what he invoked as “New Frontier heroics,” Goodwin declared that he and his peers in the Kennedy administration were members of a “democratic nobility” who had been inspired by Kennedy’s determination to bring
leadership and vision to a stolid federal government and an otherwise com-
placent American society.

It was “the role of the president,” Goodwin later
recalled, “to lead, morally and in action . . . to revive a flagging America and
draw the nation to new heights of grandeur.”

That vision was widely shared by liberal intellectuals during the latter
1950s and early 1960s. Kennedy himself had long nurtured a fascination
with aristocratic leadership. In the best-selling books he published before
gaining the presidency – Why England Slept (1940), Profiles in Courage
(1956), and The Strategy of Peace (1960) – he had suggested that an elite
class of tribunes was needed to counter the factionalism and stasis that
bedeviled democratic governments. Indeed, JFK’s most renowned phrase –
his call for Americans to “ask not what the country will do for you” but
rather “what you can do for your country” – was adapted from a slogan
of his prep school, Choate. As president, Kennedy effectively cast himself
as prep school master to the nation, inviting his countrymen to aspire to
Choate’s vision of aristocratic national service.

That language of elite service helped make a fascination with charismatic
leadership common among liberal intellectuals during the Kennedy years.
Indeed, JFK and his supporters cast his presidency as something of a re-
ferendum on competing theories of executive power and on the broader
assumptions about social organization they reflected. Kennedy’s predeces-
sor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, had presented a carefully honed image of pres-
idential restraint. Reacting against the legacy of executive expansion that
had emerged from the New Deal and World War II, Eisenhower had por-
trayed himself as a manager who brought regularity, thrift, and caution to
a sprawling federal government. Although decades later even some former
Kennedy liberals would come to admire what they now viewed as the sub-
tlety of Eisenhower’s “hidden hand presidency,” liberal intellectuals during
the 1950s saw only weakness and timidity in the Eisenhower style. Over the
course of the decade, they voiced increasing complaints about an absence of
energy and intelligence in the White House, and they often suggested that
Eisenhower’s lack of charisma had leached out across the whole of a som-
nolent American society. As John Kenneth Galbraith famously quipped, in
a remark echoed by JFK himself, the Eisenhower presidency seemed to the
era’s liberals a case of the “bland lead[ing] the bland.”

Kennedy campaigned for the White House on the promise that he would
reverse these conditions and bring direction to both foreign and domestic
policy. In JFK’s vision, the chief executive would be a “vigorou protagonist
of the national interest” rather than a “passive broker for conflicting pri-
vate interests.” Promising to take charge of an unresponsive federal bureau-
cracy and to incite a dormant nation to meet “the challenging, revolutionary
sixties,” Kennedy encouraged his administration, and ultimately his political constituency, to think of themselves as a redemptive insurgency battling to awaken and direct a slumbering behemoth. In the view of the New Frontiersmen, the president’s allies amounted to an elite, irregular force whose rare talents would enable them to outwit the routines of bureaucrats and managers. In the words of Daniel Moynihan, the Kennedy men aspired to be “guerillas” who “liv[ed] off the administrative countryside, invisible to the bureaucratic enemy but known to one another.” Richard Goodwin was more direct. He described himself as American liberalism’s Che Guevara.

That vision of insurgent leadership – of the struggle of the rebel visionary against the complacent bureaucrat – resounded widely through American culture during the early 1960s. Indeed, the Kennedy administration was surrounded by a cohort of intellectuals who echoed Schlesinger in urgently pressing “the moral need for strong leadership.” Along with Schlesinger and Galbraith, the historian James McGregor Burns, the political scientist Richard Neustadt, the journalist Theodore White, and a host of like-minded thinkers warned that the United States needed visionary leadership to overcome the rigidity and parochialism of the political system and to challenge “a vacancy in the soul of America.” But even beyond the immediate circles surrounding the Kennedy White House, the theme gained purchase. More radical political thinkers like the sociologist C. Wright Mills and the political theorist Sheldon Wolin warned that the values of democracy and citizenship could be squelched by what Wolin’s aptly titled Politics and Vision called the “megastate.” Norman Mailer famously urged Kennedy to assume the mantle of existential hero to a smugly consumerist nation – to be the Superman who challenged the Supermarket and thus reunited the banal “life of politics” and the spiritually grand “life of myth.” The youthful political insurgencies that emerged alongside Kennedy liberalism in the early 1960s – the rising New Right associated with the Young Americans for Freedom and the effervescent New Left of the Students for a Democratic Society – spoke a quite similar language. Each attacked an ossified political system that they viewed as “a Leviathan . . . out of touch with the people, and out of their control,” as the leader of the New Right, Barry Goldwater, put it his best-selling 1960 book, The Conscience of a Conservative. Each assumed, along with the Kennedy administration, that an increasingly bureaucratic government failed to meet “the real concerns and real needs of the people.” All called for a politics of “national salvation” against it.

Similar attitudes echoed throughout the United States at the time. Literature and popular culture were rife with stories – Ken Kesey’s One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1962), Madeleine L’Engle’s A Wrinkle in Time (1962), Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (1963) – that painted ominous portraits
of incipiently totalitarian bureaucracies breaking the spirits of the youthful and gifted. These dystopian fantasies were complemented meanwhile by the sudden appearance throughout the arts of visionary young innovators who threw off the formal restraints and tonal moderation that had been prominent in the aesthetic canons of the 1950s. The impulse was apparent in the post-Bop explorations of Ornette Coleman and Sonny Rollins, who pressed jazz beyond what their admirer Martin Williams decried as “the harmonic maze.” “Someone had to break through the walls . . . and restore melody,” Williams wrote. It was apparent as well in the sudden popularity of folk music, whose emerging hero, Bob Dylan, urged his peers to “step out” of the restraints of both commercial pop culture and faux authenticity. It was still more evident in the flourishing movement of Beat writers who sought, in Michael McClure’s words, to pursue “vision” against “the chill, militaristic silence” of conventional society. Not least, it was central to the work of the ludic novelists – including Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, and Bruce Jay Friedman – grouped together by critics under the label “black humor.” In darkly comic works like Catch-22 and V., those writers boldly jumbled and reassembled the conventions of mimetic fiction to render, and rise above, life in a bureaucratic world.

So, too, did a youthful generation of visual artists brush aside the restraint and earnest sobriety that had characterized the high art of the 1950s. The photographs in Robert Frank’s incendiary collection The Americans (1959) elicited a wave of popular revulsion, and a smaller burst of coterie enthusiasm, not only for the grim scenes of misery and aimlessness they revealed but for their seemingly unrefined form and structure. “The pictures took us by ambush,” John Szarkowski remembered, because they ignored “the rules and formulations . . . [of] good photography.” Similar responses greeted the post-abstract expressionist painting of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, the pop art of Warhol and Lichtenstein, and the “happenings” of Allan Kaprow. All rudely challenged boundaries between high and low, good taste and bad taste, art and life that had been core assumptions of serious expression in the decade or so after the war. Everyone in the early 1960s art world seemed to agree with Neil Klugman on the need to smash the glass window of academic formalism.

Indeed, more often than not, the young artists of the day agreed with Kennedy in viewing the contemporary landscape as a place, in McClure’s account, of bureaucratic regimentation and “spiritual drabness,” and they urged a heroic response that often sounded quite similar to the project of national renovation that Kennedy liberals like Goodwin demanded. In his “Independence Day Manifesto” (1959), Allen Ginsberg lamented the fact of a “soulless America” controlled by “abstract bureaucracies” and called for
an inspired “illuminati” to lead a return to a “wild and beautiful America.” Similarly, in “The Death of Emmett Till” (1962), the work sometimes said to be his breakthrough to serious songwriting, Bob Dylan addressed his contemporaries and warned those who could not speak out against racial injustice, “your mind is filled with dust / Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains.” Against that image of spiritual bondage, Dylan invoked an uplifting alternative of national purpose to be created by dedicated leadership: “If all of us folks that thinks alike, if we gave all we could give / We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live.”

James Baldwin made the theme most explicit in his novel Another Country (1962). At one moment in Baldwin’s narrative of bohemian misery, the unhappy housewife, Cass thinks of the failure of her husband – an imitative artist who doesn’t have “passion” or “any real work to do” – and comes to see him as typical of a vacuous nation. “This isn’t a country at all,” she laments. “It’s a collection of football players and Eagle Scouts. Cowards. We think we’re happy. We’re not. We’re doomed.” Cass’s lament is implicitly answered, however, by the musings of the genuine writer, Vivaldo. Vivaldo and his friends are Baldwin’s version of the kind of cultural insurgency that Kennedy liberals envisioned – a small cohort of elite rebels, alienated from a larger debased society, and bearing in themselves, as the novel’s title hints, the potential to re-create a sense of national mission. To drive this point home, Vivaldo at one moment unwittingly invokes the Kennedy language of the New Frontier, along with the signal Kennedy policy of space exploration. Staring into the night sky, he muses: “The sky looked, now, like a vast and friendly ocean . . . To what country did this ocean lead? for oceans always led to some great good place: hence sailors, missionaries, saints, and Americans.”

Why were such visions so prominent in the late 1950s and early 1960s? The rhetoric of elite leadership and national salvation that writers like Ginsberg and Baldwin shared with political figures like Goodwin and Schlesinger prospered during the Kennedy years in part because of the way it spoke to the expectations of a rising class of professional workers who had been educated in the new meritocratic institutions of postwar higher education. During the 1950s, the proportion of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four seeking college degrees grew by 1.3 million, from 14 to 22 percent of that segment of the national population. The expansion of colleges and universities in which these students were educated had been justified to the public on the idea that it would create a talented new leadership class capable of advancing America’s global power. (As one observer, quoting Edmund Burke, approvingly noted, the assumption was that “a great empire and little minds go ill together.”) The young people
who flourished in the new world of mass higher education came equipped therefore with more than training that encouraged them to value sophistication and innovation. As Nicholas Lemann points out, they were also nurtured in the “original principal of the American meritocracy” – that people would be chosen for “positions of authority” not for “their suitability for specific roles but for their general worth.”

The postwar expansion of higher education, in other words, created a cohort of young people who had been primed to think of themselves, in the manner of Richard Goodwin, as a “democratic nobility.” JFK’s rhetoric, which claimed to speak on behalf of “a new generation of Americans,” fit neatly with that self-understanding. Much of the cultural expression and the political energy of the day hinged, as well, on the concerns that seemed most pressing to America’s rising meritocrats – whether their gifts would be acknowledged, whether their intelligence would be rewarded with power, whether, unlike Cass’s husband, they would find “real work to do.” Indeed, for the liberal intellectuals who surrounded the Kennedy White House, the thrill of JFK’s presidency came from the conviction, in Schlesinger’s words, “that intelligence was at last being applied to public affairs.” Even those who found JFK disappointingly conservative tended to frame the issues of the day in these terms. Recalling his own dawning radicalism in the early 1960s, the former New Left leader Todd Gitlin remembered his growing frustration with the Kennedy administration’s unwillingness to hear the voices of young reformers: “Where were the signs that knowledge meant power?”

Such attitudes seemed especially plausible during the Kennedy years because of the seemingly new and transformed nature of the American political economy. Since the end of World War II, the United States had experienced a remarkably extended period of robust economic growth. Over the course of the 1950s alone, the American economy had expanded by 37 percent and median family income had grown, in adjusted dollars, by 30 percent. This growth in turn sparked a boom in suburban housing and in consumer culture that was especially rewarding to the growing class of college graduates and white-collar workers. In addition to fueling a widely noted sense of national promise, growth also inspired the common belief that the American economy had changed in fundamental ways, apparently leaving behind the problems of conflict, inequality, and insecurity that had previously seemed integral to capitalism.

A wide range of commentators made this argument during the 1950s, but it was most influentially framed by Kennedy adviser John Kenneth Galbraith, whose best-selling book of the same title identified the postwar United States as an “Affluent Society.” In Galbraith’s view, the economic
boom of the postwar years indicated that the United States had entered a
new stage of capitalism – one whose vast productive capacities created
a world of abundance and obviated the classical economic focus on scarcity.
The issues of hunger, inequality, and insecurity no longer mattered, except
as relics of the unnecessary but still potent orthodoxy that Galbraith mem-
orably dubbed “the conventional wisdom.” Instead, a new set of problems
confronted contemporary Americans. Inspired by a need for constant growth
in productivity, and no longer urged on by want, businessmen responded by
inventing new consumer desires, which were “synthesized, elaborated, and
nurtured by advertising and salesmanship.” Americans thus allowed their
new wealth to be diverted into a bounty of unnecessary and ugly consumer
products, even as the “public goods” of education, health, and common
safety were allowed to degrade. The contemporary United States, Galbraith
famously declared, had become a land of “private opulence and public
squalor.”

In response, Galbraith called for a return to “social balance.” Rather than
seeking out ever more tawdry private satisfactions, he argued, Americans
should invest in education, health, public safety, and public support for the
arts. Expanding such public goods, he contended, would do far more to
address the real problems of contemporary life – lingering poverty amid
affluence, urban blight in a suburbanizing country, the rising urban crime
that contemporaries described as “juvenile delinquency” – than would the
conventional emphasis on economic equality and security. Galbraith’s friend
Schlesinger made much the same point, arguing that postwar affluence meant
that a new “qualitative liberalism,” concerned with improving the kinds of
lives people led, would supplant the older “quantitative liberalism” of the
New Deal. Both expected that the movement for such qualitative liberal-
ism would be led by a “New Class” of white-collar workers whose depen-
dence on education and the non-pecuniary reward of “prestige” made them
especially aware of the value of immaterial, as opposed to material, goods.
Indeed, the “rapid expansion of this class,” Galbraith explained, should be
“the major goal of the society.”

As if to answer Galbraith and Schlesinger’s call for a new qualitative liberal-
alisn, the Kennedy years witnessed a sudden renaissance of social criticism.
The trend began in the late 1950s with complaints against middle-class con-
formity like William Whyte’s The Organization Man (1956). It deepened
in the early 1960s in a host of brilliant works that ultimately redefined the
liberal agenda by drawing attention to the evils and injustices that persisted
amid consumer affluence: Paul Goodman’s Growing Up Absurd (1960),
Jane Jacobs’s The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961), Michael
Harrington’s The Other America (1962), Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring
(1962), Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963), Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963).41

The writers of such works were typically bolder than most members of the Kennedy administration. Indeed, even Galbraith and Schlesinger’s advocacy of investment in public goods was far from the dominant view inside the Kennedy administration. The “qualitative liberalism” Galbraith and Schlesinger espoused competed with and was largely overshadowed by an alternative approach to domestic policy represented most potently by Walter Heller, the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, who pushed an agenda of “growth liberalism.” Despite the remarkable prosperity of the postwar decades, the American economy had entered a severe recession in late 1957. (GDP plunged 3.7 percent in the first half of 1958.) Campaigning on the slogan of “getting America moving again,” Kennedy had promised voters that his administration would deliver a 5 percent rise in GDP per year. Heller, who had been charged with making good on that promise, pushed for a program of major tax cuts and a generous rise in the depreciation allowance for business investment to stimulate demand. With the support of JFK, Heller’s position easily preempted Galbraith’s call for investment in public goods. Indeed, with the significant exceptions of the Space Program and the defense budget, where the administration achieved steep growth in spending, JFK proposed little in the way of public investment while in office. Until the growing civil rights movement forced him to take a moral stand against segregation in 1963, moreover, Kennedy paid far less attention to domestic issues than to the grand drama of the Cold War. Compared to events like the Bay of Pigs, JFK commented privately to Richard Nixon, “Who gives a shit if the minimum wage is $1.15 or $1.25?”42

And, yet, despite its apparent marginality, the qualitative liberalism advocated by Galbraith and Schlesinger turned out to complement rather than to compete with the growth liberalism pursued by the Kennedy administration – and to comport nicely as well with JFK’s philosophy of governance. For one thing, during most of Kennedy’s time in office, conservative opposition in Congress prevented the administration from realizing its plans to stimulate economic growth. As an alternative, Kennedy sought to use the tools of presidential power honed by presidents before him – executive orders, presidential commissions and special counselors, and collaboration with nonprofit organizations (such as the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations) – to spur policy innovation outside the routines of legislation and the executive bureaucracy. These approaches, which worked especially well for policy issues without established stakeholders, were suited to
placing new issues on the domestic policy agenda. Among other initiatives, the administration established a President’s Committee on Youth Crime and Juvenile Delinquency whose members, in collaboration with experts supported by the Ford Foundation, would lay the groundwork for the War on Poverty. It created a President’s Panel on Mental Retardation, which would eventually lead to legislation for spending on mental health and disabilities, and an Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General on the health dangers of smoking, which would produce a transformative public report responsible for changing the national perception of the dangers of tobacco. In addition, the Kennedy White House established a Commission on the Status of Women that would eventually foster the creation of the National Organization of Women and an Advisory Council on the Arts whose reports would culminate in the Johnson administration’s creation of the NEA and the NEH.

But the complementarity of the growth liberalism and the qualitative liberalism of Kennedy liberals was more than fortuitous. The Kennedy administration’s approach to domestic policy perfectly joined a view of the nation’s political economy with a charismatic philosophy of governance. By their very nature, public goods appeared to exceed the narrow agendas of the various interests groups that ordinarily worked through the mechanisms of representative government. As Galbraith and Schlesinger contended, without a new elite able to rise above the routines of conventional politics, qualitative liberalism would seem impossible.

Most crucially, the Kennedy administration’s domestic policy thinkers assumed that organized labor would play a role of little importance in the future of liberalism. In the view of Galbraith, for instance, the issues that had been crucial to the labor movement simply were no longer central to an affluent society. “The increase in the security and incomes of Americans at the lower income levels” meant that a once paramount goal of organized labor – the redistribution of wealth and power – no longer mattered.43 “Few things are more evident in modern social history,” Galbraith wrote, “than the decline of interest in inequality.”44

And, in fact, Galbraith’s perspective met little disagreement. The defining domestic issue of the day, virtually all observers eventually came to recognize, was the enormity of the Jim Crow system of racial oppression. JFK was notoriously reluctant to embrace the civil rights movement. But when, compelled by the moral grandeur of the movement and by the brute oppression practiced by southern racists, Kennedy finally took a stand and called for the legislation that would eventually become the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, he did so in the language of elevated national purpose that was central to his presidency. Civil rights, Kennedy told the country, was
not “a partisan issue . . . not even a legal or legislative issue alone.” It was “a moral issue . . . as old as the Scriptures and . . . as clear as the American Constitution.” “This nation,” he added, “will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.”

The issue of racial justice, in other words, was comparable to the problem of public goods stressed by Galbraith because it appeared to exceed the ordinary structures of interest group politics and thus to demand a program of elite leadership and reformed national community. By comparison, the interests of the labor movement seemed to many observers neither profound nor especially progressive. Liberal intellectuals like Galbraith assumed that organized labor had become an interest group rewarded with affluence and effectively enmeshed in the bureaucratic negotiations of the modern state. The era’s leading radical, C. Wright Mills, similarly argued that the left’s traditional investment in “the working class” was merely “a legacy” of “Victorian Marxism” and its misplaced “labor metaphysic.” The real hope for radicalism, Mills argued, lay in “the young intelligentsia.” Mills’ followers within the emerging New Left agreed. Seeking “a movement among persons whose economic role in the society is marginal or insecure,” they dismissed organized labor for its ties to “the Democratic Party and private enterprise” and sought to envision an alliance of students with “the Negro movement and . . . the unorganized poor.” Such an alliance, the young radicals argued, would bring cultural power to the poor while “improving our quality of work.”

None of these thinkers foresaw that organized labor in the United States, then at a historical peak but already significantly weakened by antiunion legislation, would soon suffer a precipitous decline in power. Nor did they anticipate that, following the economic stagnation of the 1970s, the New Right would push forward a profound political and economic transformation that would make economic inequality once again a fundamental fact of American life. Indeed, the assumption that the United States would remain an affluent society increasingly governed by a rising new class of professional workers shaped postwar intellectuals’ most basic perceptions. Even when such thinkers addressed seemingly economic questions about wealth or opportunity or labor, they tended to see these matters as “qualitative” issues of education and cultural orthodoxy. Thus, when Galbraith addressed “the new position of poverty,” he imagined that it was an unnecessary legacy of an older world. It could be explained by some individuals’ “inability to adapt to the discipline of modern economic life” or by the fact that some portions of the population were confined to a culturally impoverished “environment” – “an ‘island’ of poverty” amid a sea of affluence. The way to address such people’s exclusion from affluence was not to get them more
income, but rather to provide their cultural backwaters with the very public goods valued by members of the “new class”: “high-quality schools, strong health services, special provision for nutrition and recreation.”\textsuperscript{52} Poverty, in short, was not an issue of economic distribution but a problem of “human investment.”\textsuperscript{53}

As the Kennedy administration and the United States more broadly began to turn to the issue of poverty toward the end of JFK’s presidency, they did so primarily in the terms that Galbraith and other qualitative liberals provided. Nothing was more common in the public discourse of the era than to refer to the nation’s “islands” or “pockets” of poverty – the favored locations typically being the ghettos of the inner city or the hills of Appalachia. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* – the landmark work that put the problem of poverty on the national agenda – opened by citing Galbraith and went on to describe the impoverished as marginal figures who were being left behind by a modernizing economy, “the first minority poor in history.”\textsuperscript{54} Drawing on the idea of a “culture of poverty” that the anthropologist Oscar Lewis had recently made prominent, Harrington expanded on the implications of Galbraith’s suggestion that poverty was mainly a problem of poor education and thus of public investment. “Their entire environment, their life, their values, do not prepare them to take advantage” of the opportunities of an affluent economy, Harrington wrote. They’ve “proved immune to progress.”\textsuperscript{55}

Such a perspective, as Harrington himself came to recognize, cast issues of wealth and poverty in a manner that fit well with the political temper of the New Frontier. In stressing education and investment, this perspective appeared to avoid the emphasis on economic redistribution that Galbraith and Schlesinger and other Kennedy liberals associated with an outworn past. By the same token, it envisioned the poor not as political stakeholders with interests that could be served by representative government. Rather, it cast the impoverished in something quite similar to the role that African Americans, artists, and intellectuals all played in the political imagination of Kennedy liberals – people who, living outside a bureaucratic political system, presented a moral challenge calling for charismatic leadership and a reformed national community. As Harrington pithily noted in 1964, “The poor are not a social and political class in the sense that organized workers are.”\textsuperscript{56}

Such is the perspective taken by both Neil Klugman and Richard Goodwin. When Neil forges a friendship with a poor black boy on the basis of their shared appreciation for the paintings of Gauguin and their common indifference toward the legalistic rules of the library, he achieves something close to what Goodwin imagined would be achieved by community action in the
War on Poverty. By the same token, Klugman’s accomplishment resembles what Galbraith hoped would occur when improved education came to the nation’s islands of poverty and what the young radicals of the New Left hoped would be achieved by an alliance of students and the poor. Stepping away from the comforts of consumer wealth and outside the restrictions of public bureaucracy, Neil envisions a cultural alliance of outsiders – one that points toward a reformed national community, while making his own professional work newly valuable.

Neil’s example suggests with equal precision some of the key strengths and weaknesses of the liberal politics of the 1960s. John F. Kennedy encouraged his constituency to view themselves as an elite who saw beyond the parochial interests that bound others to the political system and whose gifts could create a more fully realized nation. That vision would help inspire many activists and intellectuals in the 1960s to make good on Arthur Schlesinger’s prophecy of a new qualitative liberalism, in the process fundamentally transforming the contours of American life. But the very desire to rise above the routines of ordinary life and to escape the bargaining of conventional politics would leave many of these achievements without grounding in powerful interest groups, and thus vulnerable to retrenchment when they met conservative opposition. Likewise, when the political winds began to change in the later 1960s, the Kennedy vision of charismatic leadership would leave a once brash elite ripe for disappointment. Having entered political life with a sense of himself as one of a handful destined to remake America, Richard Goodwin by the early 1970s had “come to the rejection of politics as a vehicle for social change in America.” “Washington,” Goodwin complained, “is a steering wheel that’s not connected to the engine.”

Similarly, Roth, having portrayed in Klugman a young man poised to realize a life of public mission, ruthlessly mocked that vision by the end of the 1960s. In Alexander Portnoy, the hero of his landmark work Portnoy’s Complaint (1969), Roth created a perfect satire of the Kennedy liberal. The assistant commissioner for the City of New York Commission on Human Opportunity, Portnoy epitomizes both the agenda of qualitative liberalism and the way that its aspirations have been co-opted by the bureaucratic routines it once hoped to transcend. In the extended first-person monologue that comprises Roth’s novel, Portnoy reveals himself to be a man whose intellectual gifts and avowed civic purposes are belied by his desperate yearning for prestige and by his poisonous sexual and racial resentments. At one key point in the novel, Portnoy recites Yeats’ poem “Leda and the Swan” to a beautiful but undereducated lover from impoverished Appalachia who has just performed fellatio upon him. The moment highlights not the lovers’
shared understanding, but rather the unbridgeable “chasm” that divides the cultural elite from the less educated, and the distrust and resentment that inevitably fills it. As Roth could not have said more clearly, by the end of the 1960s, the Kennedy era’s vision of elite cultural leadership was dying.

NOTES
1 Philip Roth, Goodbye, Columbus (New York: Vintage, 1959), 8.
2 Ibid., 43.
3 Ibid., 8.
4 Ibid., 135.
5 Ibid., 96.
8 Schlesinger Jr., A Thousand Days, 210–11.
9 Ibid., 213.
11 Ibid., 73.
16 Goodwin, Remembering America, 494, 530.
18 Goodwin, Remembering America, 105.
21 Ibid., v, iv.
“Investing in Persons”


29 Ibid., 309.


33 Schlesinger Jr., A Thousand Days, 214.

34 Todd Gitlin, The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage (New York: Bantam, 1987), 95.

35 Patterson, Grand Expectations, 312–13.

36 Ibid., 17.

37 Ibid., 14.

38 Ibid., 203.

39 Ibid., 267.


44 Ibid., 72.

45 Sorensen, Let the Word Go Forth, 193–94.


47 Ibid., 266.


49 Ibid., 22.

50 Galbraith, The Affluent Society, 250.

51 Ibid., 252, 253.

52 Ibid., 256.

53 Ibid., 257.


73
55 Ibid., 9.
57 Quoted in Bradshaw, “Richard Goodwin,” 41, 35.