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Government's Greatest Achievements of the Past Half Century

Looking back from the edge of a new millennium, it is difficult not to be proud of what the federal government has tried to achieve these past fifty years. Name a significant domestic or foreign problem over the past half century and the federal government made some effort to solve it, sometimes through massive new programs such as Medicare and Apollo, other times through a string of smaller initiatives to address enduring problems such as disease and poverty. If a nation's greatness is measured in part by the kinds of problems it asks its government to solve, the United States measures up very well, indeed.

The proof is in the federal statutes. All totaled, Congress passed more than 500 major laws between 1944 and 1999 to improve the quality of life in the nation and world. Judged not as individual programs but as part of larger endeavors, these statutes speak to the enormous range of federal engagement since World War II. Having emerged victorious from both the war and the Great Depression, Congress called upon the federal government to tackle a bold agenda worthy of the world's greatest democracy, and provided the statutory authority to act. Convinced that government could do great things, the nation asked the federal government to do just that.

Government's Greatest Endeavors

This report—based on survey responses from 450 history and political science professors—suggests that the federal government did more than aim high, however. It also suggests that the federal government often succeeded in changing the nation and the world. Although many Americans still believe that the federal government creates more problems than it solves, this report suggests that government deserves more credit than it receives.

This Reform Watch does not address whether Congress should have asked government to undertake the endeavors discussed below, nor whether the federal government should have given greater energy to fewer priorities. It is first and foremost a report about what the federal government actually sought to accomplish between 1944 and 1999, and therefore about what government did, not what it should or should not have done. Simply asked, what did the federal government try to do, and what did it achieve?

What the Federal Government Did

The footprints of federal endeavor can be found in a host of accessible documents, including the *Federal Register*, *Catalog of Domestic Assistance*, the *Budget of the United States*, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the*



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What The Federal Government Tried To Accomplish,

United States, United States Code, Code of Federal Regulations, and the U.S. Constitution. Because almost all tracks lead back to Congress, this report is based on an analysis of major laws passed by Congress since the end of World War II. Not only are the major laws easy to identify through public sources such as the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, they authorize much of the activity that occurs elsewhere in government, most notably by setting budget and regulatory priorities.

Building upon previous research by congressional scholars such as Yale University's David Mayhew, this project identified 538 major statutes as a starting point for building the list of greatest endeavors. Selected on the basis of their significance, visibility, and/or precedent-setting nature, the laws run the gamut of legislative activity, from the creation of new programs and government agencies to the passage of constitutional amendments and ratification of foreign treaties, and cover virtually all areas of federal endeavor, from child health care to economic deregulation, food and water safety to national defense.

After validating the list against other inventories of major statutes from the era, including Mayhew's list of more than 300 major laws and my own list of more than 150 management reforms, the 538 statutes were sorted into sixteen policy areas: agriculture, arts and historic preservation, civil rights, crime, the economy, education, health, housing and urban development, foreign policy and defense, government performance, income security, natural resources and energy, safety, science and technology, trade, and transportation.

Once divided by area, the statutes were sorted again based on the specific problem to be solved. Of the 27 statutes dealing with civil rights, for example, three focused on discrimination in public accommodations, seven on discrimination in the workplace, and ten on barriers to voting rights. Of the 81 statutes dealing with energy and natural resources, six focused on endangered species, eight on hazardous waste, 12 on wilderness protection, and 14 on the nation's energy supply. The result of this second sorting was an initial list of the federal government's 67 major endeavors of the past half century.

That list was further winnowed to the final 50 based on the level of effort involved in each of the endeavors. This is not to suggest that the 17 endeavors cut from the list were unimportant. They included ending discrimination in the armed services, providing help to the victims of natural and man-made disasters, promoting the arts, developing the nation's river valleys, and reforming the federal campaign finance system. Important though these endeavors are, they earned less attention from the federal government than the 50 items that made the final inventory. (See Figure 3 for summaries of the 50 endeavors. More detailed information on each endeavor and links to the relevant government agencies involved can be found at www.brookings.edu/endeavors.)

All but a handful of the 50 endeavors involve tight collections of laws organized around a consistent strategy for addressing a focused problem such as crime, water quality, or arms control and disarmament. Hence, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 fits naturally with the Age Discrimination Act of 1967 and Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in the effort to end workplace discrimination; the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 and its 1970, 1984, and 1994 amendments fit tightly with the Organized Crime Control Act of 1970 in the effort to reduce crime; the Bretton Woods Agreement

Where It Succeeded And Failed, And Why

of 1945 fits well with the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, the Trade and Tariff Act of 1984, and the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993 in the effort to expand foreign markets for U.S. goods.

Some endeavors will still strike readers as overly broad, however, whether because they involve such eclectic collections of individual statutes or a more diffuse problem. The effort to improve mass transportation includes a mix of statutes covering everything from the creation of Amtrak to urban mass transit and light rail, the effort to control immigration involves four statutes that share little beyond the word “immigration” in their title, and the effort to reduce disease combines the Polio Vaccination Assistance Act of 1955 with the National Cancer Act of 1971 and a variety of medical research bills.

Unfortunately, splitting these endeavors would have added more items to an already exhaustive survey, which, in turn, would mean further demands on the individuals who would be asked to do the rating. The result would be a lower response rate and weaker results. Moreover, it is reasonable to ask whether the mix of strange-bedfellow statutes in efforts to improve mass transportation or control immigration is an indicator of confusion in either defining the problem to be solved or creating an effective strategy for achieving results. Whereas efforts to end discrimination or expand markets shared a common strategy, the effort to control immigration focused on a mix of contradictory goals that may help explain its relatively low success rating.

Lessons of Endeavor

The list of government’s 50 greatest endeavors is best viewed as the product of a good-faith effort to identify the problems that the federal government tried hardest to solve over the past half century. As such, the list offers three initial lessons about how the federal government has sought to achieve results. (See Figure 1 for the complete list of mean scores by importance, difficulty, and success, and the final summary scores that determined the top ten list.)

First, despite the prevailing scholarly focus on breakthrough statutes such as Medicare or welfare reform, most of government’s greatest endeavors involved a relatively large number of statutes passed over a relatively long period of time. Only eight of the 50 endeavors involved fewer than three major statutes: promoting equal access to public accommodations, increasing access to health care for older Americans, enhancing workplace safety, devolving responsibilities to the states, increasing access to health care for low-income families, reforming welfare, reforming taxes, and maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf.

Remove these tightly focused endeavors from the list, and there are approximately nine statutes per endeavor. Promoting financial security in retirement involved the largest number of individual statutes at 21, followed by stabilizing agricultural price supports at 19, increasing assistance to the working poor at 15, increasing the supply of low-income housing, ensuring an adequate energy supply, and improving mass transportation all at 14. Almost by definition, great endeavors demand great endurance. It is a lesson often forgotten in the headlines about the latest legislative intrigue.

Second, it is difficult to give any single president, party, or Congress the primary credit for launching and maintaining more than a handful of the endeavors. Only nine of the endeavors can be credited primarily to Democratic presidents, and just five can be credited to Republican presidents. The rest span Democratic and Republican administrations. As a result, even though Democrats controlled Congress for the vast majority of the past fifty years, only six can be tied to unified party control of government.

Figure 1: Ranking Government's Greatest Achievements

	Overall Mean	Success Mean	Importance Mean	Difficulty Mean
1. Rebuild Europe After World War II	3.71	3.79	3.74	3.12
2. Expand the Right to Vote	3.53	3.48	3.83	2.87
3. Promote Equal Access to Public Accommodations	3.32	3.16	3.70	3.14
4. Reduce Disease	3.11	2.91	3.58	2.90
5. Reduce Workplace Discrimination	3.09	2.73	3.72	3.39
6. Ensure Safe Food and Drinking Water	3.07	2.81	3.68	2.78
7. Strengthen the Nation's Highway System	3.04	3.24	2.98	2.04
8. Increase Older Americans' Access to Health Care	3.03	2.79	3.62	2.71
9. Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit	3.01	2.93	3.09	3.25
10. Promote Financial Security in Retirement	2.99	2.80	3.49	2.64
11. Improve Water Quality	2.99	2.64	3.68	3.05
12. Support Veterans' Readjustment and Training	2.97	3.00	3.14	2.27
13. Promote Scientific and Technological Research	2.97	2.88	3.34	2.33
14. Contain Communism	2.95	2.97	2.79	3.30
15. Improve Air Quality	2.93	2.51	3.67	3.20
16. Enhance Workplace Safety	2.93	2.67	3.46	2.90
17. Strengthen the National Defense	2.91	3.00	2.88	2.40
18. Reduce Hunger and Improve Nutrition	2.90	2.58	3.64	2.61
19. Increase Access to Post-Secondary Education	2.89	2.72	3.40	2.31
20. Enhance Consumer Protection	2.88	2.66	3.35	2.81
21. Expand Foreign Markets for U.S. Goods	2.86	2.78	2.96	2.97
22. Increase the Stability of Financial Institutions and Markets	2.84	2.71	3.11	2.79
23. Increase Arms Control and Disarmament	2.84	2.29	3.70	3.55
24. Protect the Wilderness	2.79	2.53	3.33	2.70
25. Promote Space Exploration	2.76	2.84	2.51	3.00

Mean scores are rounded to two decimal points. The overall score is tabulating using six parts success, three parts importance, and one part difficulty.

Almost by definition, government's greatest endeavors reflect a stunning level of bipartisan commitment, whether reflected in repeated raises in the minimum wage or the ongoing effort to contain communism. Great endeavors appear to require equally great consensus.

Third, government's greatest endeavors involved a mix of policy strategies. Twenty-six of the 50 endeavors focused primarily on federal spending as a policy tool, including programs to provide health care to the elderly, increase home ownership, and stabilize agricultural prices. Another 20 focused primarily on regulatory strategies, including programs to improve air and water quality, end workplace discrimination, and make government more transparent to the public. The final four involved a mix of both spending and regulation. Additionally, only 13 of the 50 involved targeted benefits for a specific group of Americans such as the elderly, poor, veterans, or racial minorities. The rest diffused benefits across society more generally. Great endeavors do not appear to require any particular strategies, but do appear to thrive on wide distribution of impacts.

The Foundations of Achievement

Some of the federal government's 50 greatest endeavors clearly produced the intended results, whether measured through a vibrant European economic community or an undeniable decline in poverty among the elderly. Others produced great disappointment, whether measured by persistent poverty among children or growing urban sprawl. Still others are very much works in progress.

Figure 1: Ranking Government's Greatest Achievements

	Overall Mean	Success Mean	Importance Mean	Difficulty Mean
26. Protect Endangered Species	2.75	2.54	3.10	2.90
27. Reduce Exposure to Hazardous Waste	2.72	2.25	3.53	3.09
28. Enhance the Nation's Health Care Infrastructure	2.70	2.40	3.30	2.68
29. Maintain Stability in the Persian Gulf	2.70	2.67	2.75	2.71
30. Expand Home Ownership	2.69	2.74	2.75	2.15
31. Increase International Economic Development	2.68	2.30	3.26	3.20
32. Ensure an Adequate Energy Supply	2.67	2.20	3.50	3.00
33. Strengthen the Nation's Airways System	2.66	2.36	3.31	2.53
34. Increase Low-Income Families' Access to Health Care	2.64	2.04	3.73	2.97
35. Improve Elementary and Secondary Education	2.62	2.03	3.66	3.07
36. Reduce Crime	2.61	2.19	3.24	3.24
37. Advance Human Rights and Provide Humanitarian Relief	2.60	1.99	3.47	3.56
38. Make Government More Transparent to the Public	2.56	2.19	3.21	2.80
39. Stabilize Agricultural Prices	2.55	2.49	2.67	2.53
40. Provide Assistance for the Working Poor	2.55	2.02	3.52	2.80
41. Improve Government Performance	2.47	2.13	2.99	2.95
42. Reform Welfare	2.47	2.24	2.94	3.16
43. Expand Job Training and Placement	2.46	2.12	3.05	2.74
44. Increase Market Competition	2.45	2.51	2.34	2.31
45. Increase the Supply of Low-Income Housing	2.36	1.79	3.33	2.85
46. Develop and Renew Impoverished Communities	2.33	1.67	3.33	3.37
47. Improve Mass Transportation	2.30	1.56	3.48	3.14
48. Reform Taxes	2.27	2.24	2.29	2.35
49. Control Immigration	2.22	2.02	2.37	2.97
50. Devolve Responsibility to the States	2.11	2.23	1.85	2.15

Mean scores are rounded to two decimal points. The overall score is tabulating using six parts success, three parts importance, and one part difficulty.

From a research perspective, it is one thing to develop a list of government's greatest endeavors by sorting known legislative statutes, and quite another to draw conclusions about whether those endeavors involved important and difficult problems, and were ultimately successful. Breadth being the enemy of expertise, this project had to rely on the opinions of others to determine whether the endeavors were significant and successful.

Measuring Achievement

This project sought to measure the government's success through a mail survey of 1,039 college and university professors. Selected for their interest in twentieth century American history or American government, these members of the American Historical Association and American Political Science Association were seen as the most likely to have both the training and confidence to rate all 50 endeavors on the three core measures of achievement: (1) the importance of the problem to be solved, (2) the difficulty of the problem to be solved, and (3) the federal government's success in actually solving the problem (see figures 2a, 2b, 2c).

Figure 2a: The Foundations of Achievement

Percent of respondents who answered "very important"

1. Expand the Right to Vote: 89%
2. Rebuild Europe After WWII: 80%
3. Increase Low-Income Families' Access to Health Care: 78%
4. Reduce Workplace Discrimination: 78%
5. Promote Equal Access to Public Accommodations: 78%
6. Increase Arms Control and Disarmament: 78%
7. Improve Elementary & Secondary Education: 75%
8. Ensure Safe Food and Drinking Water: 73%
9. Improve Water Quality: 72%
10. Improve Air Quality: 72%
11. Reduce Hunger and Improve Nutrition: 72%
12. Increase Older Americans' Access to Health Care: 70%
13. Reduce Disease: 65%
14. Reduce Exposure to Hazardous Waste: 63%
15. Improve Mass Transportation: 61%
16. Advance Human Rights and Provide Humanitarian Relief: 60%
17. Provide Assistance for the Working Poor: 60%
18. Promote Financial Security in Retirement: 60%
19. Ensure an Adequate Energy Supply: 56%
20. Enhance Workplace Safety: 56%
21. Increase Access to Post-Secondary Education: 53%
22. Enhance Consumer Protection: 51%
23. Increase the Supply of Low-Income Housing: 50%
24. Develop and Renew Impoverished Communities: 49%
25. Protect the Wilderness: 49%
26. Promote Scientific and Technological Research: 48%
27. Strengthen the Nation's Airways System : 47%
28. Enhance the Nation's Health Care Infrastructure: 47%
29. Increase International Economic Development: 46%
30. Make Government More Transparent to the Public: 46%
31. Reduce Crime: 45%
32. Support Veterans' Readjustment and Training: 40%
33. Protect Endangered Species: 38%
34. Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit: 36%
35. Increase the Stability of Financial Institutions and Markets: 36%
36. Improve Government Performance: 33%
37. Expand Job Training and Placement: 33%
38. Contain Communism: 32%
39. Reform Welfare: 31%
40. Strengthen the Nation's Highway System: 30%
41. Strengthen the National Defense: 28%
42. Expand Foreign Markets for U.S. Goods: 28%
43. Maintain Stability in the Persian Gulf: 24%
44. Stabilize Agricultural Prices: 18%
45. Expand Home Ownership: 18%
46. Reform Taxes: 17%
47. Promote Space Exploration: 16%
48. Control Immigration: 15%
49. Increase Market Competition: 13%
50. Devolve Responsibility to the States: 8%

Of the 1,039 professors contacted in the summer of 2000, 450 returned completed questionnaires. Given the length and difficulty of the 150-item questionnaire, the final response rate of 43 percent can be considered a healthy total. Results from the survey have a margin of error of ± 5 percent, meaning that the true result among all historians and political scientists could vary by 5 percentage points in either direction of the reported answers. The survey was administered and tabulated by Princeton Survey Research Associates, a nationally recognized opinion research firm. (Readers can complete the survey online and compare their final rankings with the sample at www.brookings.edu/endeavors.)

Because the final sample of 230 historians and 220 political scientists was drawn from America's college and university faculties, it is hardly representative of the American public as a whole. The respondents are highly educated—more than half have tenure at their college or university. Moreover, because most American government and history professors are white and male, the final sample of respondents is also heavily weighted toward whites (90 percent), males (77 percent), liberals (65 percent), and Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents (82 percent).

Much as one might have preferred a more balanced sample, these respondents mirror the current face of the American professorate. They also represent the dominant views of just what constitutes importance, difficulty, and success in America's college and university classrooms. As such, this sample offers an important glimpse of how future generations will judge the greatest achievements of the twentieth century, if only because most of these respondents will be doing the teaching.

Aiming High, Trying Hard

Summarized in a single sentence, the survey suggests that the federal government mostly picked important and difficult problems to solve, and often had success in doing so.

To the extent that government is measured by its choice of important problems to be solved, the federal government clearly aimed high. Asked to rate the importance of the problem to be solved by each goal, respondents gave the 50 endeavors an

average rating of 3.2 on a four-point scale ranging from not important to very important. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents rated voting rights as a very important problem, followed by rebuilding Europe after World War II at 80 percent, improving access to health care for low-income Americans at 78

percent, and ending workplace discrimination, promoting equal access to public accommodations, and increasing arms control and nuclear disarmament all at 78 percent.

To the extent that government is also measured by its willingness to tackle difficult problems, the federal government most certainly picked its share of tough issues. Asked to rate the difficulty of the problem to be solved by each goal, respondents gave the 50 endeavors an average rating of 2.9 on a four-point scale ranging from not difficult to very difficult. Sixty-six percent of the respondents rated advancing human rights and humanitarian relief as a very difficult problem, followed by arms control and disarmament at 65 percent, reducing workplace discrimination at 53 percent, renewing impoverished communities at 52 percent, and containing communism at 50 percent.

Finally, to the extent that government is measured by its ability to achieve its goals, the federal government earned mostly favorable marks. Asked to rate the federal government's success in actually achieving each goal, respondents gave the 50 endeavors an average rating of 2.5 on a four-point scale ranging from not successful to very successful. Eighty-two percent of the respondents rated rebuilding Europe as a very successful endeavor, followed by expanding the right to vote at 61 percent, improving the nation's highway system at 40 percent, containing communism at 36 percent, and promoting equal access to public accommodations at 34 percent.

Government's Greatest Failures

All endeavors were not so highly rated, however. Whatever their political predispositions, the respondents shared a broad skepticism regarding several of government's greatest endeavors, if not by declaring the investments a waste of time, then clearly suggesting a need for reassessment. The respondents were mostly underwhelmed, for example, by the importance of reforming taxes (17 percent rated it as a very important problem), exploring space (16 percent), controlling immigration (15 percent), increasing market competition through government deregulation (13 percent), and devolving responsibilities to the states (8 percent).

The poor ratings for reforming taxes, market competition, and devolution reflected a mix of ideology and consensus. Combined to increase the number of responses and, therefore, the surety of the comparison, conservatives and moderates were more than ten times more likely than liberals to rate

Figure 2b: The Foundations of Achievement

Percent of respondents who answered "very difficult"

1. Advance Human Rights and Provide Humanitarian Relief: 66%
2. Increase Arms Control and Disarmament: 65%
3. Reduce Workplace Discrimination: 53%
4. Develop and Renew Impoverished Communities: 52%
5. Contain Communism: 50%
6. Reduce Crime: 48%
7. Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit: 45%
8. Reform Welfare: 43%
9. Increase International Economic Development: 41%
10. Improve Mass Transportation: 41%
11. Improve Air Quality: 40%
12. Promote Equal Access to Public Accommodations: 39%
13. Improve Elementary & Secondary Education: 38%
14. Rebuild Europe after WWII: 38%
15. Control Immigration: 36%
16. Increase Low-Income Families' Access to Health Care: 34%
17. Promote Space Exploration: 34%
18. Reduce Exposure to Hazardous Waste: 34%
19. Expand the Right to Vote: 34%
20. Ensure an Adequate Energy Supply: 32%
21. Improve Water Quality: 31%
22. Improve Government Performance: 29%
23. Reduce Disease: 29%
24. Provide Assistance for the Working Poor: 27%
25. Make Government More Transparent to the Public: 27%
26. Increase the supply of Low-Income Housing: 26%
27. Protect Endangered Species: 25%
28. Maintain Stability in the Persian Gulf: 25%
29. Enhance Workplace Safety: 23%
30. Expand Foreign Markets for U.S. Goods: 22%
31. Increase Older Americans' Access to Health Care: 20%
32. Enhance Consumer Protection: 20%
33. Expand Job Training & Placement: 20%
34. Protect the Wilderness: 19%
35. Enhance the Nation's Health Care Infrastructure: 19%
36. Ensure Safe Food & Drinking Water: 19%
37. Reform Taxes: 18%
38. Promote Financial Security in Retirement: 16%
39. Increase the Stability of Financial Institutions and Markets: 16%
40. Stabilize Agricultural Prices: 13%
41. Reduce Hunger and Improve Nutrition: 13%
42. Strengthen the Nation's Airways System: 11%
43. Devolve Responsibility to the States: 11%
44. Strengthen the National Defense: 11%
45. Increase Market Competition: 11%
46. Increase Access to Post-Secondary Education: 9%
47. Promote Scientific & Technological Research: 7%
48. Support Veteran's Readjustment and Training: 6%
49. Strengthen the Nation's Highway System: 4%
50. Expand Home Ownership: 4%

Figure 2c: The Foundations of Achievement

Percent of respondents who answered "very successful"

1. Rebuild Europe After WWII: 82%
2. Expand the Right to Vote: 61%
3. Strengthen the Nation's Highway System: 40%
4. Contain Communism: 36%
5. Promote Equal Access to Public Accommodations: 34%
6. Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit: 33%
7. Support Veteran's Readjustment and Training: 29%
8. Strengthen the National Defense: 26%
9. Increase Older Americans' Access to Health Care: 24%
10. Promote Financial Security in Retirement: 23%
11. Reduce Disease: 23%
12. Maintain Stability in the Persian Gulf: 21%
13. Promote Space Exploration: 20%
14. Promote Scientific & Technological Research: 20%
15. Expand Home Ownership: 18%
16. Expand Foreign Markets for U.S. Goods: 15%
17. Increase Access to Post-Secondary Education: 15%
18. Ensure Safe Food and Drinking Water : 14%
19. Increase Market Competition: 13%
20. Reduce Workplace Discrimination: 13%
21. Increase the Stability of Financial Institutions and Markets: 11%
22. Reduce Hunger and Improve Nutrition 11%:
23. Enhance Consumer Protection: 11%
24. Stabilize Agricultural Prices: 11%
25. Enhance Workplace Safety: 9%
26. Improve Water Quality: 9%
27. Protect Endangered Species: 8%
28. Improve Air Quality: 8%
29. Protect the Wilderness: 8%
30. Enhance the Nation's Health Care Infrastructure: 8%
31. Reform Taxes: 8%
32. Strengthen the Nation's Airways System: 6%
33. Increase International Economic Development: 5%
34. Ensure an Adequate Energy Supply: 5%
35. Increase Arms Control and Disarmament: 4%
36. Devolve Responsibility to the States: 4%
37. Control Immigration: 3%
38. Increase Low-Income Families' Access to Health Care: 3%
39. Provide Assistance for the Working Poor: 3%
40. Make Government More Transparent to the Public: 3%
41. Reduce Exposure to Hazardous Waste: 3%
42. Reduce Crime: 3%
43. Reform Welfare: 3%
44. Improve Elementary & Secondary Education: 2%
45. Expand Job Training and Placement: 2%
46. Improve Mass Transportation: 1%
47. Advance Human Rights and Provide Humanitarian Relief: 1%
48. Improve Government Performance: 1%
49. Develop & Renew Impoverished Communities: <1%
50. Increase the Supply of Low-Income Housing: 0%

devolving responsibility to the states as a very important problem (21 to 2 percent), while Republicans were more than five times more likely than Democrats to list reforming taxes as an important concern (57 percent to 11 percent). Beyond these disagreements, however, there is also a fair amount of agreement that many of the problems at the bottom of the list just did not meet the minimum threshold demanded for federal action.

The respondents were also unimpressed by the difficulty of improving access to college education (only 9 percent rated it as a very difficult problem), promoting scientific and technological research (7 percent), helping veterans readjust to civilian life (6 percent), strengthening the nation's highway system (4 percent), and expanding home ownership (4 percent). Unlike the ratings of importance, there is virtually no difference by ideology or political party in the difficulty ratings. Respondents appear to agree that solving certain problems is relatively easy, particularly when the major challenge is simply investing more money in veterans benefits, highway construction, or home loans.

Finally, the respondents clearly found reason for skepticism regarding several of the federal government's greatest endeavors. The respondents gave the federal government extremely low ratings on the successfulness of expanding job training and placement (only 2 percent said the federal government had been very successful), improving mass transportation (1 percent), advancing human rights (1 percent), improving government performance (1 percent), renewing poor communities (less than 1 percent), and increasing the supply of low income housing (zero percent). At these levels, there is no room for meaningful statistical differences between any groups of respondents. Simply put, government failed.

Differences of Opinion

Before turning to the government's greatest achievements, it is important to note the agreements and disagreements among the various groups of respondents. The consensus was most pronounced on the ratings of difficulty. Generally stated, problems that are traditionally solved through spending programs were viewed as the least difficult of government's greatest endeavors, while problems that are

traditionally addressed through regulations on behavior were seen as the most difficult.

The disagreements were much more pronounced on the ratings of importance and success, where both gender and political attitudes produced statistically significant differences. Men rated rebuilding Europe as a more important problem than women did and saw expanding the right to vote, promoting equal access to public accommodations, containing communism, and reducing the budget deficit as more successful endeavors. Conversely, women saw expanding the right to vote, improving air quality, reducing hunger, and reducing exposure to toxic waste as more important problems than men, but viewed all four as less successful.

Confirming the old adage that “where you stand depends on where you sit,” political opposites disagreed on both importance and success. Liberals and Democrats rated expanding voting rights, increasing access to health care for low-income Americans, and reducing workplace discrimination as more important problems than conservatives and Republicans, and reducing the budget deficit as a more successful endeavor. Conversely, conservatives and Republicans rated expanding trade and controlling immigration as more important problems than liberals and Democrats, and ensuring safe food and drinking water, enhancing workplace safety, protecting the wilderness, reducing hunger and nutrition, and improving air quality as more successful endeavors.

These disagreements pale in comparison to the enormous consensus regarding the relative placement of the endeavors at the top and bottom of each list. Conservatives might have moved devolution up a few levels from the bottom on the list of importance, difficulty, and success, but not into the top ten; liberals might have moved containing communism somewhat further down the respective ratings, but not to the bottom. As such, the ratings generally put the lie to the notion that the federal government creates more problems than it solves. To the contrary, the ratings clearly suggest that the federal government is fully capable of tackling important, tough problems, and succeeding.

Government’s Greatest Achievements

Achievement is the kind of word that provokes an assortment of potential definitions. Some might argue that success alone defines achievement, even if that success involves unimportant problems. Others might suggest that success is trivial unless it occurs on important problems, even if those problems are easy to solve. Still others might maintain that achievement is a word best reserved for success on important, difficult problems that the private and nonprofit sectors simply cannot solve on their own.

The term becomes even more difficult to define when it is linked to government. Some would argue that government should only engage in endeavors that show the promise of impact, others that government should reserve its energies only for important goals, and still others that government should concentrate its effort on important, difficult problems that no other sector can tackle.

Grading Achievement

This report draws a bit of insight from all three arguments, scoring the list of government’s greatest endeavors by putting the heaviest weight on success, while awarding extra credit for tackling important, difficult problems. To that end, government achievement is defined as six parts success, three parts importance, and one part difficulty, with the final score a sum of the weighted ratings on each of the 50 endeavors. Although the emphasis here is undeniably on the government’s actual impact, this scoring method declares a basic preference for aiming high. Using this scoring approach, the federal government’s top ten achievements, or greatest hits, emerge in reverse order as follows:

10. *Promote Financial Security in Retirement.* Twenty-one statutes comprise the effort to reduce poverty among the elderly through expanded benefits, pension protection, and individual savings, including 12 increases in Social Security benefits and two broad rescue attempts: the 1972 amendments to the Social Security Act that created the Supplemental Security Income program, and the Employment Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA).
9. *Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit.* Six statutes fall under the effort to balance the federal budget through caps, cuts, and tax increases, including the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Anti-Deficit Act of 1985, and the 1987, 1990, 1993, and 1997 deficit reduction/tax increase packages that contributed to the current budget surpluses. Launched in the mid 1980s as budget deficits swelled, this is the most recent endeavor on the top ten list.
8. *Increase Access to Health Care for Older Americans.* Medicare is the flagship of this highly concentrated, three-statute endeavor, which also includes the relatively small-scale Kerr-Mills 1960 precursor to Medicare and the short-lived Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act of 1988. As such, this is the only endeavor on the top ten list that involved a single breakthrough statute.
7. *Strengthen the Nation's Highway System.* Eight statutes underpin the ongoing federal effort to augment the national highway system, most notably the 1956 Interstate Highway Act. The multi-billion dollar expansions of highway aid under the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Act (ISTEA) and 1998 Transportation Equity Act for the Twenty-First Century make this the most recently amended endeavor.
6. *Ensure Safe Food and Drinking Water.* Nine statutes comprise this long-running bipartisan effort, including the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act of 1947 (signed by Harry S Truman), Poultry Products Inspection Act of 1957 (signed by Dwight D. Eisenhower), Wholesome Meat and Poultry Acts of 1967 and 1968 (signed by Lyndon Johnson), Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act (signed by Richard M. Nixon), the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 (signed by Gerald R. Ford), and the Food Quality Protection Act of 1996 (signed by Bill Clinton).
5. *Reduce Workplace Discrimination.* Seven statutes anchor this effort to prohibit workplace discrimination based on race, color, religion, gender, national origin, age, or disability, most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination Act of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The endeavor is a classic example of how an initial breakthrough statute such as the Civil Rights Act can provide a wedge for further expansion over time.
4. *Reduce Disease.* The Polio Vaccination Act of 1955 is the starting point for the most eclectic group of statutes on the top ten list. Alongside vaccination assistance, the effort to reduce disease also includes targeted research on heart disease, cancer, and stroke, bans on smoking, strengthening the National Institutes of Health, and lead-based poison prevention. Despite this dispersion, the endeavor reflects a clear commitment to reducing disease, whether through specific interventions or broad research investments.
3. *Promote Equal Access to Public Accommodations.* This three-statute endeavor originates in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, expands with the Open Housing Act of 1968, and is capped with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. As such, it shares one of its three statutory foundations with the effort to eliminate workplace discrimination and expand the right to vote, confirming the enormous impact of the Civil Rights Act as a core statute for the top ten list. It is arguably the single-most important statute on the original list of 538.

2. *Expand the Right to Vote*. Ten statutes comprise this broad effort to protect and expand the right to vote. Although the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is the list's flagship it shares the endeavor with three extensions in 1970, 1975, and 1982, three earlier statutes (the 1957, 1960, and 1964 Civil Rights Acts), and two constitutional amendments (the Twenty-Fourth outlawing the poll tax, and the Twenty-Sixth lowering the voting age to 18), making it an endeavor of notable endurance.
1. *Rebuild Europe after World War II*. Rebuilding Europe is the oldest and only inactive endeavor on the top ten list, and is anchored in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1948, better known as the Marshall Plan. Launched with the Bretton Woods Agreement of 1945, the nation could declare success by the end of the 1950s.

Further Differences of Opinion

Just because an endeavor did not make the top ten does not render it a failure. Indeed, whereas the difference between first and tenth place on the list of achievements is 0.7 of a point, the difference between eleventh and twentieth is only 0.1. Moreover, readers must drop to twentieth on the list to find the first endeavor (expanding foreign markets for U.S. goods) with importance, difficulty, and success scores below a 3.00, and must go another nine spots for the second (maintain stability in the Persian Gulf). To call all but a handful of the achievements failures is to miss the general thrust of these ratings: the federal government has made at least some impact on most of its major endeavors.

Given the earlier differences on the ratings for importance, difficulty, and success, it is not surprising that there are also differences among groups of respondents on the summary achievement scores. The ratings by men put containing communism at seventh on the list of government's greatest achievements, while the ratings by women put it at thirty-eighth (containing communism ended up at fourteenth overall); the ratings by historians put helping veterans at seventh, reducing the federal deficit at fourteenth, and containing communism at twenty-second, while the ratings by political scientists put reducing the deficit at sixth, containing communism at eighth, and helping veterans at sixteenth (overall, the deficit ended up at ninth, veterans at twelfth); the ratings by liberals put containing communism at twenty-second, while the ratings by conservatives put it at second, tracking a similar pattern among Democrats and Republicans.

But for the significant differences between political opposites on the effort to contain communism, the top ten list remains mostly unchanged no matter how the respondents are sorted. Rebuilding Europe is always the number one achievement no matter who is asked, while expanding the right to vote is always number two, and opening public accommodations number three. The same pattern holds at the bottom of the list, where devolving responsibilities to the states is always number fifty, regardless of the ideology, gender, or academic discipline of the respondent.

Lessons of Achievement

This general consensus on government's greatest achievements mostly confirms the earlier lessons of endeavor. No one party, Congress, or president can be credited with any single achievement. Even Medicare, which was a signature accomplishment of the Great Society, and the Marshall Plan, which centered in a burst of legislation during the Truman administration, had antecedents in earlier Congresses and administrations. Rather, achievement appears to be the direct product of endurance, consensus, and patience.

The list also underscores three other lessons of achievement. First, achievement appears to be firmly rooted in a coherent policy strategy. The government's top ten achievements center on a relatively clear description of the problem to be solved, and supported by enough resources, budgetary or administrative, to succeed. Interestingly, the top ten achievements also involve relatively clear and measurable results. It is easy to tell whether government is actually making progress expanding the right to vote, reducing disease, building roads and bridges, and so forth.

Second, achievement appears to reside at least partly in the moral rightness of the cause, whether a belief in human equality, a commitment to world peace and democracy, or a commitment to honoring promises to previous generations. No one knew at the time whether expanding the right to vote, opening public accommodations, or ending workplace discrimination would eventually succeed. Nor did anyone have a defensible cost/benefit analysis to prove that government should act. Yet, government most certainly did act, taking the moral high ground despite significant resistance.

Third, achievement appears to adhere to government's readiness to intervene where the private and nonprofit sectors simply will not. It is impossible to imagine the private sector taking the lead in rebuilding Europe or the nonprofit sector massing the capital to build the interstate highway system. In this era of promises to create smaller, more limited government, it is useful to remember that the federal government appears to do best when it exercises its sovereignty to take big risks that no other actor could ever imagine taking.

These lessons are echoed in the endeavors that reside at the bottom of the summary scores in Figure 1. The effort to increase the supply of low-income housing, renew poor communities, improve mass transit, reform taxes, control immigration, and devolve responsibilities to the states all have suffered from a lack of clarity regarding means, and a general ambiguity regarding ends. Over-identified with one party or the other, over-dependent on one president or another, they were also battered by intense partisan disagreement, changing economic and social conditions, and a notable lack of public support.

Conclusion

Just as one can look back with considerable awe at what the federal government tried to accomplish over the past half century, so, too, can one look forward with considerable doubt about whether government will ever be so bold again. Are the nation's leaders so worried about losing their jobs that they will not take the risks embedded in the kind of inherently risky projects that reached the top ten list above? Are Americans so impatient for success that no program, however well designed and justified, can outlast the early difficulties that face so many innovative efforts? And are the media so addicted to stories of government failure that no endeavor, however noble and well designed, can survive long enough to achieve results?

These questions would not be so troublesome but for the fact that many of the most important problems identified in this report are still in need of solution. The nation has far to go in increasing access to health care, reducing the dangers of nuclear war, improving air and water quality, reducing hunger, and so on. To the extent that the nation's leaders avoid the risky issues in favor of safe rewards, the public demands instant gratification instead of long-term diligence, and the media punishes the trial and error so essential to ultimate impact, the list of government's greatest achievements of the next half century will be short, indeed.

Figure 3: Government's Greatest Endeavors

Endeavor	Description
Advance Human Rights and Provide Humanitarian Relief	Action to improve social conditions abroad by protecting human rights and providing relief aid. e.g., United Nations charter 1945, Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act 1986, Kosovo intervention 1999.
Contain Communism	Action to impede communism. e.g., Aid to Greece and Turkey 1947, North Atlantic Treaty 1949, Korean and Vietnam Wars.
Control Immigration	Action to set and enforce standards on immigration, temporary admission, naturalization and the removal of aliens. e.g., Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter) 1952, Immigration and Nationality Act amendments 1965, Immigration Reform and Control Act 1986, Immigration Act 1990.
Develop and Renew Impoverished Communities	Action to improve the quality of life in poor rural and urban areas. e.g., Appalachian Regional Development Act 1965, Demonstration Cities Act 1966.
Devolve Responsibility to the States	Action to shift power from the federal government to the states. e.g., State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act (general revenue sharing) 1972, Unfunded Mandate Reform Act 1995, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (welfare reform) 1996.
Enhance Consumer Protection	Action to create safety standards and raise awareness of potential hazards. e.g., Amendments to Food, Drug and Cosmetics Act 1962; Fair Packaging and Labeling Act 1966; Consumer Product Safety Act 1972.
Enhance the Nation's Health Care Infrastructure	Action to build medical treatment and research facilities. e.g., Hospital Survey and Construction Act 1946; Mental Retardation Facilities Construction Act 1963; Heart Disease, Cancer and Stroke amendments 1965.
Enhance Workplace Safety	Action to reduce workplace hazards. e.g., Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act 1969, Occupational Safety and Health Act 1970.
Ensure an Adequate Energy Supply	Action to facilitate the development of domestic energy sources and promote conservation. e.g., Atomic Energy Act 1954, trans-Alaskan pipeline 1973, Energy Policy and Conservation Act 1975, Natural Gas Wellhead Decontrol Act 1989.
Expand Home Ownership	Action to promote ownership through home loans and mortgages. e.g., Housing Act 1950, 1959; Tax Reform Act 1986.
Ensure Safe Food and Drinking Water	Action to establish and enforce food and water quality standards. e.g., Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act 1947; Wholesome Meat Act 1967; Safe Drinking Water Act 1974.
Expand Foreign Markets for U.S. Goods	Action to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade. e.g., Bretton-Woods Agreement Act 1945, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1947, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Treaty 1961, North American Free Trade Agreement 1993.
Expand Job Training and Placement	Action to create jobs and provide vocational training. e.g., Employment Act 1946, Small Business Act 1953, Economic Opportunity Act 1964, Comprehensive Employment and Training Act 1973, Job Training Partnership Act 1982.
Expand the Right to Vote	Action to guarantee the right to vote for all Americans over 18. e.g., Civil Rights Act 1964, 24th Amendment 1964, Voting Rights Act 1965, 26th Amendment 1971.

Figure 3: Government's Greatest Endeavors

Endeavor	Description
Improve Air Quality	Action to control air pollution and raise air quality standards. e.g., Clean Air Act 1963, Motor Vehicle Pollution Control Act 1965.
Improve Elementary and Secondary Education	Action to enhance education from preschool through high school. e.g., National Defense Education Act 1958, Elementary and Secondary Education Act 1965, Head Start 1967.
Improve Government Performance	Action to enhance government efficiency. e.g., Civil Service Reform Act 1978, Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act 1982, Chief Financial Officers Act 1990, Government Performance and Results Acts 1993, Federal Acquisitions Streamlining Act 1994.
Improve Mass Transportation	Action to develop improved urban mass transportation and railway systems. e.g., Urban Mass Transportation Act 1964, Rail Passenger Service Act 1970.
Improve Water Quality	Action to control water pollution and raise water quality standards. e.g., Water Pollution Control Act 1948, 1972; Water Quality Act 1965, 1987.
Increase Access to Post-Secondary Education	Action to provide assistance for higher education through loans, grants and fellowships and to build and improve facilities. e.g., Higher Education Facilities Act 1963, Higher Education Act 1965.
Increase Arms Control and Disarmament	Action to limit nuclear weapon development and use. e.g., Nuclear Test Ban Treaty 1963, Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty 1969, SALT/ABM Treaty 1972, Intermediate Range Nuclear Force Treaty 1988.
Increase International Economic Development	Action to provide aid for development. e.g., Establishment of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development under the Bretton-Woods Agreement Act 1945, Act for International Development 1950, Peace Corps 1961.
Increase Low-Income Families' Access to Health Care	Action to provide health insurance to poor Americans. e.g., Medicaid 1965, Children's Health Insurance Program 1997.
Increase Market Competition	Action to deregulate industries including airlines, banks, utilities and telecommunications. e.g., Airline Deregulation Act 1978, Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (financial services overhaul) 1999.
Increase Older Americans' Access to Health Care	Action to provide health insurance to older Americans. e.g., Medicare 1965, Catastrophic Health Insurance for the Aged 1988.
Increase the Stability of Financial Institutions and Markets	Action to increase access to financial market information, assist ailing institutions and avert potential problems. e.g., Securities and Exchange Act 1975; Insider Trading and Securities Fraud Enforcement Act 1988; Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery and Enforcement Act 1989.
Increase the Supply of Low-Income Housing	Action to develop new public housing and subsidize rents in private units. e.g., Housing Act 1949; Housing and Community Development Act 1965, 1974.
Maintain Stability in the Persian Gulf	Action to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War.
Make Government More Transparent to the Public	Action to increase public access to government activity and reduce administrative abuse. e.g., Administrative Procedures Act 1946; Freedom of Information Act 1966, 1974; Government in the Sunshine Act 1976; Ethics in Government Act 1978; Inspector General Act 1978.
Promote Equal Access to Public Accommodations	Action to desegregate public facilities and require handicapped accessibility. e.g., Civil Rights Act 1964, Open Housing Act 1968, Americans with Disabilities Act 1990.

Figure 3: Government's Greatest Endeavors

Endeavor	Description
Promote Financial Security in Retirement	Action to raise Social Security benefits, expand the number of recipients, ensure program's solvency, protect private pensions and encourage individual savings for retirement. e.g., Social Security expansions, Supplemental Security Income program 1972, Employment Retirement Income Security Act 1974.
Promote Scientific and Technological Research	Action to support basic research and to develop new technologies, such as the Internet. e.g., National Science Foundation Act 1950, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency 1958, Communications Satellite Act 1962.
Promote Space Exploration	Action to develop the technology for a lunar landing and further space exploration. e.g., National Aeronautics and Space Administration Act 1958, Apollo mission funding 1962, funds for a manned space station 1984.
Protect Endangered Species	Action to prevent loss of threatened species. e.g., Marine Mammal Protection Act 1972, Endangered Species Act 1973.
Protect the Wilderness	Action to safeguard land from commercial and recreational development. e.g., Wilderness Act 1964, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act 1968, Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act 1980.
Provide Assistance for the Working Poor	Action to raise the income of the working poor through tax credits, assistance with expenses and a guaranteed minimum wage. e.g., Earned Income Tax Credit 1975, Family Support Act 1988, increases to the minimum wage.
Rebuild Europe After World War II	Action to support post-World War II economic recovery and political stability. e.g., Establishment of the International Monetary Fund under the Bretton-Woods Agreement Act 1945, Foreign Assistance Act 1948, North Atlantic Treaty 1949.
Reduce Crime	Action to increase law enforcement officers, strengthen penalties, control guns and support prevention programs. e.g., Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act 1968, 1994; Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act 1993.
Reduce Disease	Action to prevent and treat disease through research, direct assistance and regulation. e.g., Polio Vaccine Act 1955, National Cancer Act 1971.
Reduce Exposure to Hazardous Waste	Action to restore the environment and manage hazardous waste. e.g., Resource Conservation and Recovery Act 1976; Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (Superfund) 1980.
Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit	Action to balance the federal budget. e.g., Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act (Gramm-Rudman-Hollings) 1985, Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act 1990, Omnibus Budget Reconciliation 1993, Balanced Budget Act 1997.
Reduce Hunger and Improve Nutrition	Action to provide food assistance to children and adults. e.g., National School Lunch Act 1946; Food Stamp Act 1964; Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) 1972.
Reduce Workplace Discrimination	Action to prohibit employers from discriminating based on race, color, religion, gender, national origin, age or disability. e.g., Equal Pay Act 1963, Civil Rights Act 1964, Age Discrimination Act 1967, Americans with Disabilities Act 1990.
Reform Taxes	Action to lower tax rates. e.g., Revenue Act 1964, Economic Recovery Tax Act 1981.

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Figure 3: Government's Greatest Endeavors

Endeavor	Description
Reform Welfare	Action to increase self-sufficiency among welfare recipients. e.g., Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act 1981, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act 1996.
Stabilize Agricultural Prices	Action to support crop prices, distribute surpluses and control production. e.g., Agriculture Act 1948, 1961; Agriculture Trade Development and Assistance Act 1954; Food Security Act 1985.
Strengthen the Nation's Airways System	Action to create and maintain the air traffic control system and promote the safety and development of the air industry. e.g., Federal Airport Act 1946, Airport and Airways Development Act 1970.
Strengthen the Nation's Highway System	Action to build, improve and maintain the interstate highway system. e.g., Federal Aid to Highway Act 1956, Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act 1991.
Strengthen the National Defense	Action to build and modernize the national defense. e.g., Authorization of tactical and strategic weapons systems, Department of Defense Reorganization Act 1958, Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act 1986.
Support Veterans' Readjustment and Training	Action to assist veterans with their transition back to civilian life. e.g., Serviceman's Readjustment Act 1944, New GI Bill Continuation Act (Montgomery GI Bill) 1987.

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