Government's Greatest Achievements

From Civil Rights to Homeland Defense

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Aiming High, Trying Hard

Greatest Endeavors of the Past Half-Century

Looking back at the events of September 11, 2001, it is easy to wonder whether the United States will ever return to normal. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington changed American life forever, fundamentally altering just what "normal" means. Americans will always remember where they were when they heard the news about the World Trade Center and Pentagon tragedies.

As Americans look for reassurance in this era of vulnerability, at least some can be found in the federal government's extraordinary record of achievement over the past half century. Despite what may have seemed like insurmountable odds at the time, the federal government helped rebuild Europe after World War II, conquered polio and a host of other life-threatening diseases, faced down communism, attacked racial discrimination in the voting booth, housing, and the public square, and reduced poverty among the nation's elderly to its lowest levels in modern history.

If assassinations, urban riots, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, Iran hostage taking, the first New York Trade Center bomb-

ings in 1993, presidential resignations and impeachment, and stock market crashes were not enough to prevent progress on these extraordinary endeavors, neither will the acts of terrorism. To the extent a nation's greatness is measured by what its government has accomplished through good times and bad, Americans can have great confidence that the federal government will succeed in strengthening homeland defense. Perhaps that is why trust in government surged by nearly 30 percent in the wake of the attacks, reaching levels not seen since 1968 in the midst of the Vietnam War. Perhaps that is also why confidence in federal employees to do their jobs also hit historic highs. Americans know that there are few problems that cannot be solved with determination and grit.

Some of this success has come through great laws such as the 1965 Medicare Act, which created a new health care program for the nation's elderly, or audacious efforts such as the Apollo space program, which helped the United States win the race to the moon. However, most of the success has been achieved and sustained through collections of smaller, often unheralded laws to clean the air and water, reduce disease, feed the hungry, or protect wild lands and rivers. America rarely conquers its problems in an instant. Rather, it tends to wear problems down, year after year, law after law, until victory is won.

The proof is in more than 500 major laws passed since 1946. Having emerged victorious from World War II and a decade-long economic depression, Congress called upon the federal government to tackle an agenda of concerns worthy of the world's greatest democracy. Over the last half of the twentieth century, the federal government was asked to advance human rights abroad, increase homeownership, expand voting rights, improve air and water quality, reduce the threat of nuclear war, create open housing for all races, protect endangered species and the wilderness, reduce hunger, defeat communism, and build the interstate highway system. Although there have been failures mixed in with the success, Congress has never been reluctant to ask the federal government to tackle tough, difficult problems, and the federal government has mostly succeeded in response.

In this era of promises to create smaller, more limited government, Americans often forget that the federal government has amassed a distinguished record of endeavor that no other sector, private or nonprofit, could create on its own. Perhaps that is why President Bush took such pains after the terrorist attacks to reassure the nation that the federal government would be open for business the next day.

The United States is now facing another seemingly insurmountable problem in the form of international terrorism. By early 2002 it had already produced enough federal action to make this one of the most intensive endeavors of recent history. Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act in October, giving the president sweeping authority to investigate and prevent terrorism, and created a new federal Transportation Security Agency in November to tighten security at the nation's airports. At the same time, the president ordered thousands of troops and aircraft to Afghanistan to topple the Taliban government that had harbored Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network of terrorists.

However, as of early 2002 the question is not whether the effort to strengthen homeland defense and battle terrorism abroad will be one of the federal government's greatest endeavors of the new century. Rather, the question for most Americans is whether the United States will actually achieve results. Will airports become safer? Will bin Laden be brought to justice? Can government prevent future attacks? Moreover, as the events of September 11 fade from memory, it is not clear whether homeland defense and the war on terrorism will remain high priorities far into the future. How much money is Congress really willing to spend on domestic security? How long will Americans tolerate long lines at the airport? How long will the president stay focused on homeland defense?

These questions focus on the three major terms in this book: endeavor, achievement, and priority. An *endeavor* involves the government's effort to solve some problem such as racial discrimination, air pollution, terrorism, or poverty. An *achievement* entails government progress in actually solving a problem, for example, by reducing discrimination, preventing pollution, strengthening security, or

lowering poverty. Finally, a *priority* involves choices about how hard the government should work on an endeavor in the future. Chapter 1 of this book focuses on the federal government's greatest endeavors of the past fifty years; chapter 2, on what America's leading historians and political scientists see as the government's greatest achievements of the past fifty years; and chapter 3, on what economists, historians, political scientists, and sociologists believe are the most important priorities for the future.

This chapter explores government's greatest endeavors by defining terms, sorting individual laws into broader endeavors, and searching for patterns in what government has tried to do these past fifty years. Readers are cautioned that the term *greatest* does not mean the best, most successful, or even most important. Rather, it refers to the problems that the federal government tried hardest to solve.

THE ANATOMY OF AN ENDEAVOR

Americans tend to focus on government laws, orders, and decisions whenever they think about what the federal government does. That is how the media and many experts think of government, too. Congress passes laws, presidents issue orders, and federal courts make decisions. Survey researchers rarely ask Americans what they think about the federal government's overall effort to reduce poverty among the elderly, improve drinking water safety, or protect the wilderness, for example. They ask instead about public confidence in the future of programs such as Social Security, fears about specific problems such as airplane hijackings, or proposed solutions such as oil drilling in the Alaskan wildlife preserve.

Much as individual laws, orders, and decisions matter to what the federal government does, they are best viewed as the building blocks of larger endeavors to solve problems. Even great laws such as the 1935 Social Security Act, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Medicare Act, and the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts have been amended repeatedly over time to broaden their coverage and protect past gains. Just as Rome was not built in a day, federal

progress on the great problems of history is rarely found in a single law or decision.

There are three parts to every government endeavor chronicled in this chapter. First, every endeavor involves a problem. Some problems are more difficult to solve, while others appear to be easier. Some problems are more important, while others are judged less significant. Finally, some problems can only be solved if the federal government takes the lead, while others are better tackled by state and local governments, the nonprofit sector, private groups, or individual citizens and families.

Second, every endeavor involves a solution. Some solutions can be found in a law or laws such as the Voting Rights Act, the Housing and Community Development Act, or the antiterrorism laws passed in the wake of the New York and Washington attacks. Other solutions can be found in Supreme Court decisions such as *Brown* v. *Topeka Board of Education*, which abolished racial discrimination in the public schools. Still others can result from presidential orders. By definition an endeavor demands tangible, not symbolic, action.

Some problems involve more than one kind of solution, however. On the one hand, the federal government strengthened the nation's highway system by doing the same thing over and over: building thousands and thousands of miles of highways, bridges, and roads. On the other hand, Congress has never been quite sure what it wants to do about immigration. It has passed laws to invite illegal immigrants to stay and laws to force them to leave, laws to tighten the nation's borders and laws to let more immigrants in.

Third, every endeavor involves some level of effort. The level of effort can be measured in a variety of ways: the number of laws passed, pages of regulation written, amount of money spent, or number of employees hired. Great endeavors require more than great intentions: they usually require sustained action over time.

WHAT GOVERNMENT HAS TRIED TO DO

There are several ways to identify the federal government's greatest endeavors. One is to search the federal budget for the largest pro-

grams. Another is to read and count the number of pages devoted to a specific problem in the *Code of Federal Regulations*, which records the rules that the federal government adopts to implement the laws, decisions, and orders given by the three branches of government. Still another way is to track the number of federal employees involved in solving a particular problem.

This book is based on reading the federal statute books, which record every law passed by Congress, signed by the president, and deemed constitutional by the federal courts. Not only are laws the "stem cell," or starting point, for almost everything that government does, they are easy to identify and count. Scholars know exactly how many laws have been passed in every two-year Congress, what those laws were intended to do, and whether those laws are major or minor, substantive or symbolic. Moreover, to the extent that Congress is serious when it tries to solve a problem through the legislative process, the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* provides an easily accessible source of information on the most important laws.

The *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* is considered more than just the final word on what Congress and the president try to do. Its annual summary of the major legislation enacted and signed into law is considered the authoritative source on which laws are important. Because laws determine the number of federal rules, size of the federal budgets, and number of federal employees, they are the logical place to start in building a list of the government's greatest endeavors.

Congressional Quarterly is not the only resource on the major laws of the past half-century, however. Yale University political scientist David Mayhew has been working on his own list of major legislation for the past two decades, adding new laws at the end of each two-year Congress.[1] Mayhew's list of more than 300 laws is based on two sweeps of history, the first a careful reading of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* at the end of each year to see what the two newspapers covered as the most important laws of the year, and

1. David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946–1990* (Yale University Press, 1991).

the second a careful reading of deeper histories by political scientists, historians, and other scholars to see which of those laws passed the test of time as truly important.

Using Mayhew's list as an anchor, this study of government's greatest endeavors is based on a further reading of every *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* and year-end *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* summary from 1944 through 1999. Researchers looked not only for the accomplishments of Congress as a whole but also for legislation that might have been overlooked by the press or scholars, or could be judged a significant legislative accomplishment in its own field. That deeper analysis produced a list of more than 540 major laws passed over the last half-century, dealing with virtually every domestic and foreign problem imaginable. Some of the laws are instantly recognizable whereas others are only known to the small number of experts in specific fields. But whether familiar or obscure, these laws show just how much the federal government tried to do between the end of World War II and the inauguration of President George W. Bush in 2001.

FROM LAWS TO ENDEAVORS

It is one thing to identify the major laws of the past half century, however, and quite another to combine those individual laws into broad endeavors. The first step is to identify the problem each law tried to solve. As already noted, Congress has asked the federal government to solve just about every problem imaginable, from promoting the arts at home to promoting democracy abroad, protecting the elderly from poverty to protecting the world from communism, expanding access to education for America's children to expanding humanitarian relief for the world's poor.

From 1944 through 2001, for example, Congress passed twenty-seven major laws to protect and expand civil rights in the United States. Some of those laws dealt with expanding the right to vote by eliminating practices such as the literacy test and poll tax; others focused on ending discrimination against people of color, women, and the disabled; and still others aimed to end discrimination in

public places such as bus stations, restaurants, and hotels. Although all of these laws dealt with discrimination, there were at least three specific problems Congress tried to solve: voting discrimination, workplace discrimination, and discrimination in public accommodations such as hotels and housing.

During the same period, Congress passed more than eighty laws to protect the environment and ensure an adequate supply of energy. Some of those laws dealt with protecting endangered species, some with protecting the wilderness; other laws involved the national energy supply or cleanup of hazardous waste. Although all of the laws had a very broad aim, Congress tried to solve at least six different problems: endangered species, loss of wilderness, hazardous waste, energy shortages, air pollution, and water pollution.

The second step in developing a list of greatest endeavors is to identify the federal government's greatest, or most intensive, efforts of the past fifty years. There is nothing magical about this: one simply determines how hard Congress asked the federal government to work in solving the given problem. It is easy to see, for example, that for the past fifty years, Congress has asked the federal government to devote more time, money, and employees to strengthen the nation's highway system than to develop the nation's great river valleys, or that Congress has expended more legislative energy to promote space exploration than to protect privacy. This does not mean that developing river valleys and protecting privacy are unimportant, trivial goals. Rather, it demonstrates that all government endeavors do not involve the same amount of effort, whether measured by the amount of money, time, legislative attention, federal employees, rules, or bureaucracy devoted to each cause.

Most of the fifty greatest endeavors discussed below involve tightly focused legislative action to solve clearly defined problems. Thus the Civil Rights Act of 1964 fits naturally in the effort to attack workplace discrimination as addressed by the Age Discrimination Act of 1967 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Likewise, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968—along with its 1970, 1984, and 1994 amendments—fits in tightly with the effort to reduce crime expressed in the Organized Crime

Control Act of 1970. In another example, the World War II Bretton Woods Agreement, which created a new international financial system, fits naturally with the campaign to expand world trade as addressed by the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, the Trade and Tariff Act of 1964, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1993.

However, some of the fifty greatest endeavors involve less coherent collections of laws. The legislative effort to improve mass transportation includes a broad range of laws covering everything from the creation of the Amtrak passenger rail system to more federal funding for urban mass transit, while the effort to control immigration involves four contradictory laws that share little more than the word "immigration" in their titles.

There are lessons to be learned from the lack of coherence, however. The lack of consensus on whether and how to address the problems of immigration and urban mass transit, for example, is one explanation for the general lack of progress in either area. In contrast, the general consensus on whether and how to end racial discrimination and reduce poverty among older Americans is one explanation for the great progress toward solving both problems.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LIST

There are three unique aspects of the inventory discussed below. First, some laws contribute to more than one endeavor, particularly when those laws involve omnibus, or large-scale, packages of ideas.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act is one such law. The act banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin, whether by employers or labor unions, in businesses or in hotels, restaurants, theaters, gas stations, and all other public accommodations. It provided federal money to help integrate the public schools, allowed the federal government to withhold federal money from organizations such as colleges and universities that discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender, religion, or national origin. It also created the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to review complaints about workplace discrimination. As such, the act

contributes to at least two endeavors discussed below: ending workplace discrimination and opening public accommodations. As this book suggests later, it may well be the single most important domestic law enacted over the past fifty years.

The 1947 National Security Act is another multiendeavor law. The act created the modern Department of Defense by merging the old Departments of War, Army, and Navy with the newly created Department of the Air Force under a unified command. It also created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council (NSC), both of which are intimately involved in U.S. foreign policy. Thus the act contributes to two endeavors discussed below: containing communism and strengthening the national defense. It may well be the single most important foreign policy law passed over the past fifty years.

Second, readers may wonder why highly visible endeavors such as enhancing peace in the Middle East or protecting civil liberties such as freedom of the press and religion are not on the following list. The answer is that this is a book about laws, not executive action or court decisions. Notwithstanding all the time presidents have spent on the Middle East and all the Supreme Court decisions on civil liberties, Congress did not enact enough major legislation for either area to make the list of government's greatest endeavors.

This is not to suggest that the presidency or the federal judiciary is somehow irrelevant to government's greatest endeavors. Indeed, both play a significant role in both proposing and enforcing the laws that form the endeavors discussed below. At the front end of the legislative process, presidents often set the agenda of national concern by proposing laws to Congress through their budgets, treaty negotiations with other nations, and State of the Union addresses, while the federal courts often stimulate legislative action by taking the lead in defining a problem such as racial discrimination. At the implementation stage of the process, presidents are responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of government, while the courts enforce the laws.

Third, readers will note that strengthening homeland defense and the war on terrorism are not on the list of government's greatest

endeavors of the past fifty years. That is because the war on terrorism did not begin in earnest until the first World Trade Center bombings in 1993 and only intensified after the September 11 attacks. Congress passed several smaller scale laws to fight terrorism prior to 2001, but none made the *Congressional Quarterly* list of major legislation in 2000. Although homeland defense and the war on terrorism certainly make the list of government's greatest endeavors of today, they were not on the list before September 11, 2001.

GOVERNMENT'S FIFTY GREATEST ENDEAVORS

Congress asked the federal government to solve a truly remarkable assortment of problems between World War II and the end of the twentieth century. The fifty endeavors reviewed here reflect its most intensive efforts to improve life both at home and abroad; some of these were under way before 1945 and almost all continue today. To the extent a society is measured at least in part by what it asks its government to do, Americans can be very proud indeed. (See appendix A for a basic list of the endeavors and some of the action Congress took in support of them.)

Advance Human Rights and Provide Humanitarian Relief

Congress has been promoting human rights and helping victims of natural disasters through legislation ever since it ratified the United Nations charter in 1945. Having started with 51 members, the UN now consists of 185 countries, including all of the former members of the Soviet Union. By providing a safe place to resolve very difficult world problems, the United States and its allies hoped that dialogue and understanding would replace military power and war as a basis for making decisions.

Congress continued the effort to help other nations when it passed the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, approving the admission of 214,000 refugees, mostly from Europe. It acted again to help refugees when it passed the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962, which provided almost $4 billion in foreign economic and

military aid. Congress also sought to end racial separatism in South Africa by passing the 1986 Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, authorized the use of U.S. troops in the Somalia peacekeeping mission, and approved the air war over Kosovo in the spring of 1999.

Seven major laws or treaty ratifications have supported this endeavor.

Contain Communism

Congress began fighting the spread of communism almost immediately after World War II when it endorsed President Harry Truman's grand strategy of containment, promising to defend freedom wherever it was threatened. Part of implementing this Truman Doctrine involved helping democratic allies that bordered the collection of communist states called the Soviet Union. Congress approved $400 million for aid to Greece and Turkey in 1946, for example, and ratified the North Atlantic Treaty creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, which pulled together the nations of Western Europe and the United States into a military and economic alliance. Despite these earlier efforts, mainland China fell to the communists in 1949, and North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950.

The North Korean invasion provided a particularly significant test of the grand strategy of containment. The United States responded with a full-scale military intervention that cost 54,000 U.S. lives and another 100,000 casualties in a war that ended in stalemate. A decade later the United States became engaged in Vietnam. Convinced that the fall of South Vietnam would lead to the fall of Southeast Asia, tipping a long chain of dominoes that would eventually lead to the fall of its own government, the United States entered what would become its longest and most unpopular war. Starting with a handful of military advisers in 1959 and rising to a force of more than 500,000 troops in 1965, the Vietnam War also ended in stalemate after the loss of 58,000 lives.

Four major laws have supported this endeavor.

Control Immigration

For 200 years Congress has been trying to strike the right balance between encouraging legal immigration while protecting the nation's borders against illegal entry, including that by terrorists. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 that established a new quota system limiting immigration from each area of the world; it then amended the act in 1965 to lighten the restrictions.

Congress continued moving the pendulum with the 1986 Immigration Control Act. On the one hand, the act gave amnesty to all illegal aliens already residing in the United States by making them citizens. On the other hand, the act increased the penalties for hiring an illegal alien and strengthened the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and its border patrol as a bulwark against illegal entry. In 1990 Congress approved a substantial increase in immigration, including a new category for workers with hard-to-find skills such as computer programming.

Four major laws have supported this endeavor.

Develop and Renew Impoverished Communities

Congress has been working to reduce urban and rural poverty since the mid-1940s when it twice amended the Rural Electrification Act to expand rural access to electricity and telephones. The tone of the federal government's work to improve poor communities changed dramatically in 1961 when Congress passed the Area Redevelopment Act to help poor Americans in the poorest sections of the Appalachian Mountains that run 2,200 miles from Mount Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia. The act authorized $400 million for rural development loans for areas that had experienced high unemployment over the three preceding years. Congress passed the 1961 Housing Act two months later, including $2 billion for urban renewal efforts.

Congress expanded this part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty when it passed the 1965 Appalachian Regional

Development Act, which covered the entire state of West Virginia and parts of eleven other Appalachian states. The bill provided more than $1 billion for economic development, road construction, and an assortment of vocational programs, water programs, and even a program for filling and sealing old coal mines. Congress also passed the 1966 Democratic Cities and Metropolitan Development Act, the 1972 Rural Development Act, and the 2000 Community Renewal and New Markets Act, all of which funded expanded aid to poor communities.

Nine major laws have supported this endeavor.

Devolve Responsibilities to the States

Since the 1970s Congress has made a host of efforts to return power to state and local governments through what is often called the new federalism, a term President Richard Nixon coined in the early 1970s to describe his plans to shift federal responsibilities and dollars back to the states and localities. However, Nixon did believe that welfare and environmental protection were best handled by the national government, in part because the states could not be trusted to set a reasonable minimum level of welfare benefits and in part because many environmental problems cross state lines.

Congress implemented Nixon's new federalism through two major programs. The first was a new form of national support for the states that replaced a vast array of existing categorical grants for community development, job training, and education with giant block grants that states could use with fewer strings attached as long as the money was spent for the broad purposes intended. The second was a new national funding program called general revenue sharing, which was designed to give states a portion of the national tax dollars. Begun in 1972 and ended in 1986, revenue sharing was an effort to reduce the national budget deficit. The program sent states and localities an average of over $6 billion a year even as the amount of money devoted to block grants continued to increase steadily.

Nixon's ideas for returning power to the states are still active. They were adopted as part of the Contract with America agenda by

the new Republican House majority in 1994, where they came to be known as the ''Newt Federalism'' in honor of Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a contemporary advocate of states' rights. Congress sent billions in funding back to the states under the 1972 State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act, which is more commonly known as revenue sharing, and tried to reduce burdens on states through the 1995 Unfunded Mandate Reform Act, which requires Congress to pay more attention to any proposed law that establishes an unfunded mandate.

Three major laws have supported this endeavor.

Enhance Consumer Protection

Congress has been trying to protect consumers from unsafe products since the early 1900s, when it passed the landmark Food and Drug Act that prohibited interstate commerce in misbranded food, drinks, and drugs. In 1951 Congress expanded that law by setting uniform standards for over-the-counter drugs such as aspirin and cold medicines, and did so again in 1962 when it required every drug manufacturer to register its drugs with the government.

Congress also pushed for greater honesty in labeling of food and drugs under a number of laws, starting with the 1965 Federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act, which required all cigarette cartons and packages to contain the label "Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health." Congress continued to demand greater honesty under the 1966 Food Safety and Labeling Act, which required more detailed information on the content of packaged foods, and the 1966 Child Protection Act, which extended labeling requirements to cover dangerous toys and children's products. These laws acquired greater muscle in 1972 when Congress created the Consumer Product Safety Commission to enforce standards for consumer products other than food, drugs, firearms, and motor vehicles, which are all products covered by other government agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration. In 1990 Congress further extended truth-in-labeling by passing the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act,

requiring food producers and distributors to provide information on the amount of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, sugar, fiber, and protein while prohibiting producers from making nutritional claims, such as "low fat," without evidence.

Thirteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Enhance the Nation's Health Care Infrastructure

Congress has invested billions over the past fifty years building and modernizing America's hospitals and health research centers. Much of that funding was funneled through the 1946 Hospital Survey and Construction Act, which authorized $75 million a year for construction of public and nonprofit hospitals. In 1949 Congress doubled the program's funding, encouraging much of the hospital construction that is still part of the nation's health care infrastructure today, and under the Community Health Services and Facilities Act of 1961, it increased federal grants to the states for the construction of nursing homes and outpatient facilities for the aged and chronically ill. The federal government became involved in building mental health facilities under the 1963 Mental Retardation Facilities Construction Act, which was expanded in 1970 with increased federal funding. Congress also ordered the federal government and the states to work together on health planning in 1966 and again in 1974 by providing health planning grants and by creating the National Council on Health Planning and Development. By 1974 it also changed funding priorities under the 1946 Hospital Survey and Construction Act to favor modernization of old facilities over new construction.

Eleven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Enhance Workplace Safety

Congress has been trying to protect workers from accidents and unsafe working conditions since the early 1900s when it asked the federal government to regulate the meat packing industry. Congress expanded the effort to coal miners under the 1952 Mine Safety Act,

which gave the federal government authority to shut down dangerous mines. In an attempt to combat black lung disease, Congress amended the law in 1969 to set limits on the amount of coal dust allowed in mine shafts.

Although these two laws did reduce mine accidents and black lung disease, they did nothing to help other workers. To protect all workers, Congress passed the sweeping 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act, which established the principle that employers should take all reasonable measures to protect their employees. The law created a new federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which was given the authority to set and enforce standards covering a long list of threats to workplace safety. OSHA was also given the authority to inspect workplaces and issue citations for immediate action.

Three major laws have supported this endeavor.

Ensure an Adequate Energy Supply

Over the past half century, Congress has asked the federal government to pursue three major energy goals. The first goal was set in the 1940s when Congress passed the 1946 Atomic Energy Act, which established the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to both regulate and promote the use of nuclear power for civilian and military use. Congress gave the AEC authority to grant licenses to domestic nuclear power producers in 1954 and also guaranteed up to $500 million in liability coverage in the event of an accident at a federally licensed power plant.

At the same time, Congress also encouraged development of traditional sources of energy, including oil, natural gas, and electricity. It funded three new power-generating dams on the Colorado River in 1956 and authorized construction of a pipeline to tap into the vast northern Alaskan oil reserves in 1973. In addition, Congress encouraged energy conservation by establishing new fuel efficiency requirements under the 1975 Energy Policy and Conservation Act.

In 1974, recognizing the difficulty of running these programs through a patchwork of federal agencies, Congress divided the AEC

into the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Energy Research and Development Administration. The former was given the responsibility to regulate the nuclear industry, while the latter was designed in part to expand the industry and other sources of energy. Facing continued gasoline and heating oil shortages in 1977, Congress again reorganized energy policy by creating the Department of Energy in 1978, thus responding to President Jimmy Carter's declaration of the "moral equivalent of war" on energy shortages.

Fourteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Ensure Safe Food and Drinking Water

Congress has been protecting citizens from tainted food and impure drinking water for more than a century, but its efforts became much more aggressive in 1947 when it required that all pesticides be registered with the Department of Agriculture and gave the federal government authority to ban all unregistered poisons, as well as any that did not list the product name, manufacturer's address, warnings, and the proper antidote on the packaging. Congress expanded these protections in 1964 and again in 1972, when it required registration of all pesticides with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which had been created in 1970 to coordinate most environmental laws.

Congress passed many other laws to protect citizens from tainted food and drinking water. In 1957 it directed the Department of Agriculture to inspect poultry, in 1967 it strengthened existing meat standards, and in 1968 it toughened the poultry standards by giving the federal government power to oversee state inspection programs. Congress also passed the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act to protect citizens from chemicals and pesticides that migrate into drinking water.

Nine major laws have supported this endeavor.

Expand Homeownership

Congressional efforts to expand homeownership began before the end of World War II with passage of the 1944 Servicemen's Read-

justment Act, or "GI Bill," which gave returning soldiers access to low-cost home loans. Under the original act, veterans could apply for loans of up to $7,500. Today, veterans can apply for loans up to $240,000, depending on their income.

Home loans were useless if no homes were for sale, however. With the nation mired in a housing shortage, Congress passed the 1950 Housing Act, which provided additional loan guarantees for all Americans, thus stimulating a housing boom. Further shortages in areas near defense plants prompted Congress to pass the Defense Housing Act of 1951, which provided even more federal funding to stimulate construction in those areas.

By 1965 federal housing programs had become so numerous and important that Congress created the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Although veterans' home loans remained with the Veterans Administration (now Department of Veterans Affairs), HUD became the host of a number of programs to stimulate community renewal, urban development, and low-income housing construction. Congress also encouraged the purchase of homes by allowing homeowners to deduct the full cost of interest payments from their annual taxes, thereby improving the attraction of buying, not renting, homes.

Nine major laws have supported this endeavor.

Expand Foreign Markets for U.S. Goods

Congress has been regulating imports and exports since the time of the Revolutionary War, which itself was sparked in part by unfair British taxes on imports, such as tea and sugar. After 150 years of protecting its own industries, the U.S. turned toward free trade as a way to promote exports abroad. Congress embraced free trade by ratifying a number of agreements: the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, which established a new world currency system; the 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which created a framework for resolving trade disputes and promoting free trade; and the 1961 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which created a trade alliance consisting of the United States and

eighteen European countries. All of these reforms were designed to stabilize the world financial markets in the wake of World War II while encouraging the lowering of trade barriers.

Congress overhauled the nation's trade laws in 1962 under the Trade Expansion Act, which gave the president a five-year authority to cut tariffs on imports and exports by 50 percent. The Trade Act of 1974 extended that authority, enabled the president to assign most favored nation trading status to certain countries, and created the Office of Special Trade Representative in the Executive Office of the President. Congress has generally remained steady in promoting free trade. For example, despite strong opposition from organized labor, which feared a loss of jobs to Mexico, Congress ratified the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993, lifting all tariff barriers among the United States, Mexico, and Canada by 2008.

Thirteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Expand Job Training and Placement

Since the Great Depression of the 1930s, Congress has been helping unemployed Americans find work. It restarted the endeavor after World War II when it passed the Employment Act of 1946, which set a goal of full employment for all citizens. Although the act did not contain any funding, it pledged the federal government to help every American "able, willing, and seeking work." Congress followed up in 1953 by creating the Small Business Administration to help small businesses attain government contracts, loans, and disaster relief.

With the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962, Congress involved the federal government in job training through a three-year program to help retrain workers who had lost their jobs due to new technology. The Job Corps was created two years later, based on rural "conservation camps" and other training centers to give high school dropouts access to basic education and vocational training. Congress continued to expand federal training programs under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in 1973, which provided federal dollars for public service jobs

around the country. Beset by fraud and public opposition to federally funded jobs, CETA was replaced in 1982 by the Job Training Partnership Act.

Twelve major laws have supported this endeavor.

Expand the Right to Vote

The right to vote was granted to former slaves under the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 and to women under the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. However, it was not guaranteed until the 1960s when Congress passed the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which outlawed the use of poll taxes or other taxes as a condition for voting in federal elections, and the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act, which prohibited the use of literacy tests as a condition of voting and authorized federal registrars to register thousands of black voters across the South. Although the 1965 act is considered the breakthrough law, Congress actually started work on voting rights in 1957 when it cre-

MATT HERRON/TAKE STOCK

Marching toward conflict, 1965. Marchers leave the city of Selma en route to a confrontation with Alabama state police on what would become known as "Bloody Sunday."

ated the Civil Rights Commission, which had the power to investigate allegations that some Americans were being deprived of their right to vote due to their race, religion, or ethnicity. Congress also passed the Civil Rights Act of 1960 that increased penalties for violent acts designed to stop individuals from voting because of their race or color.

Congress again expanded the right to vote when it ratified the Twenty-Sixth Amendment in 1971 that gave eighteen- to twenty-year-olds the right to vote, required all polling places to be accessible to the disabled in 1984, and made registering to vote easier under the National Voter Registration Act, or motor voter law, in 1993.

Ten major laws have supported this endeavor.

Improve Air Quality

Although Congress expressed its concern for clean air with passage of the 1955 Air Pollution Control Act, the law itself did little more than authorize the federal government to collect and share research on the problem. Congress provided just $5 million for the effort. When it passed the Clean Air Act in 1963, Congress moved closer toward a strong federal role but once again put most of its faith in state governments to regulate any air pollution that threatened the health or welfare of citizens.

Just two years later, however, Congress amended the Clean Air Act to give the federal government authority to set standards for automobile emissions. Although states were responsible for enforcement, the federal government was in charge of establishing a national standard that every state had to meet or beat. In 1970 Congress ordered automobile manufacturers to reduce air pollution by 90 percent, while authorizing the newly created Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to pay states up to two-thirds of the costs arising from car inspection programs. Congress rewrote the Clean Air Act in 1990 to broaden federal authority to regulate the pollution that causes the brown haze called smog and the sulfur-heavy emissions from coal-fired electric plants that cause acid rain.

Eleven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Improve Elementary and Secondary Education

For most of American history, educating children from kindergarten through twelfth grade was the exclusive responsibility of state and local governments. That changed when the Soviet Union launched a tiny satellite called Sputnik in 1957. Fear of losing the space race led Congress to pass the 1958 National Defense Education Act, which established federal college fellowships for teacher training in math, science, and language.

Congress expanded the federal role under the sweeping 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The act set a national goal of equal access to education for every state and locality, created legal rights for poor and handicapped children, and provided $150 million in federal funding to build new schools and train teachers. Congress also enacted the 1967 Head Start program to provide preschool programs for poor children, created the Department of Education in 1979 to oversee all federal education programs, and passed the 1994 Educate America Act, which established a set of targets for educational improvement by the year 2000.

Although the federal government provides just 8 cents of every dollar spent on elementary and secondary education, it asks a great deal for its money. Under the education reforms passed in 2001, all states that accept federal funding must create testing programs for all grades.

Five major laws have supported this endeavor.

Improve Government Performance

Congress has been trying to make government more efficient since the late 1940s when it created the first of two blue-ribbon national commissions to make recommendations for reducing waste and improving performance. Many of those recommendations were implemented through reorganization plans submitted by the president and approved by Congress, creating a new organizational chart for the federal government that included the new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and new systems for tracking federal spending and hiring.

Congress tinkered with further reforms in the 1950s and 1960s, but returned to major reform legislation in 1978 when it enacted the Civil Service Reform Act. The federal personnel system was streamlined to make hiring and firing easier and to establish a pay-for-performance system that would reward civil servants for doing their jobs well. For most of the next two decades, Congress concentrated on improving financial management in government by assigning chief financial officers for every department and agency in 1990, creating a new government-wide performance measurement system in 1993, and streamlining the way the federal government buys everything from pencils to missiles in 1994.

Ten major laws have supported this endeavor.

Improve Mass Transportation

Ever since it provided land for the transcontinental railway system in the 1800s, Congress has been working to strengthen public transportation systems such as buses, passenger and commuter trains, and subways. In 1958 Congress passed the Transportation Act in an effort to revitalize the nation's railroads through $500 million in loans to support intercity passenger service. Twelve years later it stepped in again to rescue passenger service by creating Amtrak, the government-owned rail system that continues to lose money to this day.

Congress broadened the scope of its efforts with the 1964 Urban Mass Transportation Act, which gave cities more than $300 million to build new subways and bus systems. Although it invested another $12 billion in 1970 and provided more federal aid under the National Mass Transportation Assistance Act of 1974, Congress has been far more interested in building roads and highways than subways, light rail lines, and bus systems.

Fourteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Improve Water Quality

Congress gave the federal government responsibility for reducing water pollution several years before it dealt with air quality. It passed

CLEVELAND PRESS COLLECTION

River on fire. Cleveland's Cuyahoga River was so polluted that it actually caught fire several times in the 1960s. Four decades later, it is now both swimmable and fishable.

the first Water Pollution Control Act in 1948, which gave states small grants to control water pollution and build sewage treatment plants. The federal government's role was strengthened under the 1965 Water Quality Act by establishing the nation's first water purity standards, which states had to meet or beat, and by creating the Water Pollution Control Administration. The law also authorized the federal government to spend $150 million on construction grants for sewage treatment facilities.

Congress continued to increase the federal government's role under the 1966 Clean Waters Restoration Act, which provided even more funding for sewage treatment, and under the 1970 Water Quality Improvement Act, which authorized the president to regulate "hazardous polluting substances" such as chemicals and other industrial by-products. Over the next twenty years, Congress

expanded these laws to cover other toxic pollutants, increase federal funding, and protect marine fisheries. Under the Water Quality Act of 1987, for example, Congress ordered the federal government to protect the Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes from further pollution and to clean up Boston Harbor.

Eleven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase Access to Postsecondary Education

Congress involved the federal government in helping Americans attend college long before it got involved in elementary and secondary education. Under the GI Bill, for example, Congress provided funding to allow more than 16 million World War II and Korean War veterans to attend college. It also funded the building of thousands of college classrooms, libraries, and research centers under the 1963 Higher Education Facilities Act and later established a special class of loans for students pursuing degrees in medicine or other health services. With the Middle Income Student Assistance Act of 1978 and the Higher Education Act of 1992, Congress continued to expand access to loans by raising the income limits. By 2000 all students were guaranteed access to a federally guaranteed college loan.

Thirteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase Arms Control and Disarmament

Soon after development of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, Congress began trying to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. It started by ratifying the treaty establishing the International Atomic Energy Agency, which was designed to promote the development of peacetime uses of nuclear energy. Congress also created the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in 1961 to advise the president on controlling the spread of weapons and ratified the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited the testing of nuclear devices in the atmosphere, space, territorial waters, or at sea.

Congress also ratified the 1969 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which sought to prevent the spread of nuclear technology to

other nations; the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty in 1972, which froze the number of land-based missiles and weapon-carrying submarines at then-existing levels; and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, which prohibited the United States and Soviet Union from deploying an antimissile shield. Almost twenty years later, Congress ratified the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), limiting the United States and Soviet Union to 6,000 nuclear warheads each.

Eight major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase International Economic Development

Even before World War II had ended, Congress asked the federal government to begin strengthening the economic, civic, and educational systems of impoverished countries when it approved U.S. participation in the World Bank, an international organization that exists to this day as a source of aid to poor countries. It also approved contributions to the International Monetary Fund, another international organization that provides loans for projects that cannot attract private funding.

Congress consolidated all U.S. foreign aid into a single program under the Economic Cooperation Act in 1950, providing more than $3 billion to stimulate economic growth, and followed that with another $3.4 billion in military and economic development under the 1957 Mutual Security Act. It also approved U.S. membership in the Inter-American Development Bank, which concentrates on aid to Latin America, and expanded aid more generally under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. At almost the same time, Congress approved President John Kennedy's proposal for a Peace Corps of volunteers who would form "a grand and global alliance . . . to fight tyranny, poverty, disease, and war."

Eight major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase Health Care Access for Low-Income Families

Congress directed the federal government to improve low-income health care access under two major laws enacted more than thirty

years apart: the 1965 Medicaid Act, which allocated funds to help states provide medical assistance to the poor, and the 1997 Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which funds health care coverage for poor children. Although the federal government substantially funds both programs, Medicaid and CHIP are both administered by the states as part of welfare for the needy. However, the federal government does set limits on what states can pay for with Medicaid and CHIP dollars, including a ban on the use of Medicaid money for abortions except in the case of rape, incest, or when a pregnancy threatens the life of the mother.

Two major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase Market Competition

From the late 1800s through the 1930s, the federal government created regulations in an effort to improve competition and prevent monopolies in certain industries; however, in the mid-1970s it began deregulating many of these same industries. Congress started with transportation, deregulating the airline industry in 1976, which led to the abolition of the Civil Aeronautics Board that once controlled all airline routes. Then Congress focused on the trucking and railroad industries, both of which were opened to competition in 1980. This was followed by intercity bus deregulation in 1982, which allowed bus companies such as Trailways and Greyhound to compete head-to-head wherever they wanted.

Congress also deregulated the energy industry, first by lifting price controls on "new gas" discovered after 1978 and later by eliminating controls on "old gas" discovered before 1978. Congress also deregulated financial institutions, starting in 1980 by permitting banks and savings and loan institutions to remove interest rate ceilings. Finally, Congress deregulated the telecommunications industry in 1996, opening competition in the telephone and cable television industries.

Eleven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase Health Care Access for Older Americans

Congress directed the federal government to help older Americans gain better access to health care under three laws: a small, but precedent-setting 1960 law that gave states federal grants to cover some of those costs; the landmark 1965 Medicare Act, which established an entirely new program to insure older Americans against medical cost; and the creation of a federal insurance program for catastrophic disease, which was repealed when older Americans rebelled against its cost.

Medicare is by far the most significant of the three laws. Passed despite intense opposition from the American Medical Association, which represents physicians, the law included two parts. The first gave older Americans insurance against hospital costs and was financed by a payroll tax on earnings. The second allowed older Americans to purchase additional insurance to cover doctor's visits, outpatient services, and laboratory bills.

Three major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase the Stability of Financial Institutions and Markets

Congress has been protecting stock market investors since the 1933 Securities Act, which prohibited a series of practices that had contributed to the 1929 stock market collapse. In addition, Congress created deposit insurance to protect citizens from banking failures.

The federal government's regulatory role expanded with the passage of a series of laws designed to force companies to disclose more information about their finances and operations and to prevent abuse of insider information that might benefit some stock traders in the market. Under the 1964 Securities Act Amendments, for example, Congress strengthened federal oversight of stock trading and required stock exchanges such as the New York Stock Exchange to develop programs for self-policing. Congress tightened those regula-

tions even further under the 1988 Insider Trading and Securities Fraud Enforcement Act.

During the deregulation period, however, Congress also loosened some of the rules governing the kinds of loans that savings and loan institutions could make, which in turn, eventually contributed to an industry-wide collapse. Congress then stepped in with a $50 billion bailout in 1989.

Nine major laws have supported this endeavor.

Increase the Supply of Low-Income Housing

Ever since the 1949 Housing Act, which offered federal loans to local governments for slum clearance and direct grants to create 810,000 new units of low-income housing, Congress has been developing housing for the poor and providing rent support. It authorized the federal government to continue building low-income housing under a series of laws passed in the 1960s, directed toward the needs of older Americans in 1962 and low-income families in 1965. In the latter year the Department of Housing and Urban Development was also established to help administer the growing number of housing programs.

By the late 1980s, Congress turned its attention to homelessness in general. In 1987, for example, it provided $1 billion in aid to the states to build and operate emergency shelters and food programs, create new low-income housing and apartments, and provide community health care services for the homeless.

Fourteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Maintain Stability in the Persian Gulf

This endeavor is composed of just one major law: the congressional resolution authorizing the 1991 Gulf war against Iraq. The resolution was prompted by the Iraqi invasion of the oil-rich nation of Kuwait in August 1990. The United Nations passed its own resolution on November 29 authorizing UN forces to expel the Iraqis within sixty days. On January 12, 1991, just three days before that deadline, the Senate authorized the use of military force against

Iraq, giving the president authority to apply whatever force necessary to implement the UN resolution. On January 16 the president ordered the beginning of a month-long air war against Iraq. The House authorized the use of force the next day, and a month later the president ordered a full-scale ground assault on Iraqi forces. Exactly 100 hours later, the Gulf war ended with the Iraqi military in full retreat.

Make Government More Transparent to the Public

Starting with passage of the 1946 Administrative Procedure Act, Congress has been trying to open government to the sunshine. This law requires that all proposed rules be published in the *Federal Register*. Publication in the federal government's newspaper marks the beginning of what is known as the notice and comment period, during which those affected by the proposed regulation are encouraged to make their opinions known to the agency.

Congress also enacted the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), signed into law on July 4, 1966, which requires that agencies open themselves up to the press and public. Using FOIA requests, citizens can ask government for information on any topic. Although the federal government always has the option to deny the request for national security purposes or to protect the privacy of other citizens, FOIA provides almost unlimited access to routine information on what government spends, how it operates, whom it employs, and what it does, as well as complete access to any information it might have on the individual citizen making the request.

A number of other laws were enacted to make government more open, including the aptly named Government in the Sunshine Act of 1975 and the Ethics in Government Act of 1978. The basic goal of all of these laws is to stop government from keeping secrets.

Ten major laws have supported this endeavor.

Promote Equal Access to Public Accommodations

Working with the federal judiciary, Congress has been striving to end discrimination in public accommodations for four decades.

Although the Supreme Court ordered the integration of the public schools in 1954, Congress pressed forward under the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination based on race, religion, gender, or ethnicity across a broad spectrum of public accommodations ranging from restaurants to movie theaters to hotels. The act permitted citizens to file suit for damages in federal court against any business or individual that violated the law and allowed the Attorney General of the United States to file suit on any citizen's behalf.

Congress continued to open accommodations under the 1968 Open Housing Act, which prohibited discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which required governments and private employers to make their jobs, facilities, and transportation systems accessible to the disabled. Modeled on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the ADA lists establishments that must become accessible and includes a requirement that all public buses used on fixed routes be wheelchair accessible.

Three major laws have supported this endeavor.

Promote Financial Security in Retirement

Congress first insured older Americans against poverty under the 1935 Social Security Act, which provides income for millions of retired citizens. Under the law eligible retirees receive benefits that are weighted to deliver a greater rate of return on past payroll taxes to lower-income recipients.

Although the program was launched in the 1930s, its major expansions occurred in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In all, Congress enacted twelve separate increases in Social Security benefits from 1946 to 1972 and finally indexed benefits to rise automatically with inflation starting in 1974. Along the way Congress also created the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program in 1971, which provides federal support for impoverished older Americans, and passed the 1974 Employee Retirement Income Security Act, which created a new federal program and agency to protect retirement pensions.

Congress also acted twice to rescue the Social Security program from funding crises. In 1977 it raised Social Security payroll taxes to compensate for a shortfall, hoping that the repair would last for seventy-five years. Just six years later, however, Congress had to pass new legislation that cut benefits, increased taxes, and raised the retirement age to avert another crisis.

Twenty-one major laws have supported this endeavor.

Promote Scientific and Technological Research

With passage of the 1950 National Science Foundation Act, Congress established a federal role in both financing and exploring new technologies such as the Internet. The newly created National Science Foundation (NSF) started small with just $15 million a year, but it quickly grew into a significant source of funding for scientific, technical, and social science research.

Spurred on again by Soviet advances in technology, Congress also created the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in 1958 as a source of intense research on military technology. Although its specific mission was military research, the agency has produced a long list of achievements of direct benefit to nonmilitary purposes, most notably generating the basic research that led to the Internet.

Four major laws have supported this endeavor.

Promote Space Exploration

The Department of Defense entered the space race immediately after World War II by developing long-range ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Congress expanded the effort to include the peaceful uses of space when it created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958. Led by President Kennedy's commitment to land a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s, Congress authorized the funding for the Apollo lunar landing program.

After the last moon landing in 1972, Congress authorized development of the new Space Shuttle program, provided the dollars for

deep space exploration and the Hubble telescope, and approved funds for the design, launch, and construction of an international space station. Congress also broadened NASA's ongoing research program to include high-speed computing and advanced aircraft design. Unfortunately, several of NASA's most visible post-Apollo projects ran into trouble. The Shuttle Challenger exploded just after launch in 1986, killing all seven astronauts abroad, the Hubble telescope had to be repaired because of a flaw in its huge lens, and NASA lost two Mars probes due to simple incompetence in the late 1990s.

Five major laws have supported this endeavor.

Protect Endangered Species

Congress declared that protecting endangered species was the federal government's official policy in 1966 when it gave the Department of Interior a small amount of money to acquire lands and waters for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Three years later Congress passed the Endangered Species Conservation Act, which banned the importation of any fish or wildlife on a list of endangered species. After another three years, Congress enacted the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, which imposed a permanent moratorium on the killing of seals, sea lions, whales, porpoises, dolphins, sea otters, and polar bears. Congress combined these various efforts under the landmark Endangered Species Act of 1973, expanding the number of protected animals and inaugurating a program to protect species that might be threatened far into the future.

Five major laws have supported this endeavor.

Protect the Wilderness

Although Congress began setting aside parcels of land for national parks and monuments in the 1800s, it expanded the effort dramatically under the 1964 Wilderness Act. The act created an entirely new National Wilderness Preservation System to protect all national forest lands previously designated as "wilderness" or "wild," and ordered the Departments of Agriculture and Interior to inventory all

federal land holdings to determine whether they should be protected from commercial use, construction of roads and recreational facilities, or mining. All totaled, the act set aside 9 million acres of wilderness for protection.

Congress ordered the federal government to protect wild and scenic rivers in 1968, including eight wild rivers such as the Shenandoah in Virginia and the Rio Grande in New Mexico, and permitted the government to purchase 100 acres of land on both sides of a protected river. Congress also passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act in 1977 to combat the adverse effects of strip mining for coal and other minerals, which involves the removal, or stripping, of all vegetation and land above a mineral deposit. It also continued to set aside more land for national parks, including 100 million acres of Alaskan wilderness in 1980 and 7.5 million acres of California desert in 1994.

Nine major laws have supported this endeavor.

Provide Assistance for the Working Poor

One way to prevent the need for welfare is to raise the income of poor workers, whether through tax credits, federal grants, or higher hourly minimum wages for individual workers. Congress has tried all three approaches over the past fifty years to make work more attractive than welfare. There have been eight separate increases in the minimum wage between 1946 and 1999: from 25 cents an hour in 1938, for example, to 40 cents in 1944, 75 cents in 1949, and so forth on up to $5.15 an hour by 1997.

Congress also created the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in 1973, which is administered by the federal government's Internal Revenue Service. Under the EITC the working poor are eligible for federal income tax refunds each April, even if they did not earn enough money to pay any income tax at all. Congress also helped the working poor by creating the Children's Health Insurance Program in 1996.

Fifteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Rebuild Europe after World War II

Convinced that the damage caused by World War II made the democratic nations of Western Europe more susceptible to communist takeover, Congress committed the United States to helping those nations rebuild their economies, even before peace arrived. Having approved U.S. membership in the World Bank and contributions to the International Monetary Fund, both of which promised loans to help rebuild the world economy, Congress later authorized billions in foreign aid to Europe under the 1948 Foreign Assistance Act, better known as the Marshall Plan in honor of its designer, General George C. Marshall. By the end of the program, the United States had provided $12 billion in economic aid to Great Britain, France, and its other European allies, as well as to its former enemies, Germany and Italy.

Four major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reduce Crime

Although state and local governments are responsible for the vast majority of law enforcement, Congress became increasingly concerned about fighting crime in the 1960s following widespread urban unrest, a rising crime rate, and growing worries about organized crime.

In 1968, for example, Congress provided more than $100 million to help local governments establish crime prevention programs, another $15 million for the purchase of riot control equipment, and $10 million to battle organized crime. Congress also established the first federal handgun licensing system. Two years later, it created a federal witness protection program, gave federal prosecutors new tools to detain suspects and investigate organized crime, and appropriated more money for crime control.

After years of conflict, Congress passed two laws in the early 1990s to control the sale and manufacture of guns. The first was the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, which required back-

AP WIDE WORLD/JIM PRINGLE

The cost of war. U.S. tanks rumble through Nuremberg, Germany, in April 1945. The United States had already begun thinking about how to rebuild Europe long before the end of the war.

ground checks on all handgun purchasers. The second was the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1994, which banned nineteen types of assault weapons; established additional federal penalties for hate crimes against victims selected for their race, religion, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation; and required life imprisonment for criminals convicted of three federal felonies (sometimes called a "three strikes and you're out" law).

Eight major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reduce Disease

Over the past fifty years, Congress has directed the federal government to devote enormous effort to preventing and treating disease. It started in 1950 when it directed the nation's chief medical officer, the U.S. Surgeon General, to create two new public research institutes: one to study arthritis, rheumatism, and metabolic disease, and the other to study neurological diseases and blindness. Congress created a half-dozen other federal research institutes over the next fifteen years and increased federal funding for university and private research at the same time. In 1965 Congress changed its funding strategy from general medical research to more focused work on heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

In addition to research, Congress has also asked the federal government to help prevent specific diseases. It passed the 1955 Poliomyelitis Vaccine Act to combat the polio epidemic and provided additional vaccination assistance against a number of other childhood diseases in 1962. Congress also adopted a statutory ban on smoking on domestic airline flights.

Eleven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reduce Exposure to Hazardous Waste

In 1965 Congress engaged the federal government in managing the growing volume of household and industrial waste when it passed the Solid Waste Disposal Act regulating garbage and landfills. After authorizing a two-year study of how to handle the disposal of radioactive and other hazardous wastes, the Congress enacted the landmark Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, which regulated disposal of everything from dry-cleaning fluid to toxic wastes and established the Office of Solid Waste within the Environmental Protection Agency.

Congress created the $1.6 billion Superfund program in 1980 to help the federal government clean up hazardous waste sites that have been abandoned by polluters. Although Congress gave the federal government authority to find and sue the original polluters to

recover part of the cost of cleanup, Superfund was designed to begin the process well before legal action occurs.

With these solid and hazardous waste laws in place, Congress turned to the disposal of nuclear waste in 1982 and new restrictions on leaking underground gasoline tanks in 1986. Congress also required chemical manufacturers to establish right-to-know programs to alert local communities about the release of hazardous waste.

Seven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reduce the Federal Budget Deficit

Congress has been grappling with the budget deficit ever since federal spending soared with the Vietnam War and the launch of many of the previously described social programs. Congress enacted a long list of laws over the last three decades to reduce the deficit, including the 1974 Budget and Impoundment Control Act, which created a new congressional budget process, and the 1985 Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act, better known as the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings law, which created a never-used system of deep budget cuts as a threat against increased spending.

The budget was finally balanced after Congress and the president negotiated sweeping agreements in 1990, 1993, and 1997. The combination of spending caps, tax increases, declining defense spending with the end of the Cold War, and a booming economy produced the federal government's first budget surplus in thirty years in 1999. Unfortunately, the economic recession of 2001 drove the budget back into deficit.

Seven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reduce Hunger and Improve Nutrition

Immediately after World War II, Congress committed the nation to reducing hunger among children when it passed the 1946 National School Lunch Act, which covers the cost of lunches for poor children. Not only did the program feed hungry children, it had the

added political benefit of paying farmers and food producers for excess commodities such as cheese, pork, and milk.

Congress expanded the endeavor two decades later with two laws: the 1964 Food Stamp Act and the 1972 Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Both programs give recipients coupons that can be traded for certain foods at grocery stores and are restricted to families and women at or below certain income levels. Congress also expanded the school lunch program in 1972 by creating a summer food program for school-age children.

Five major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reduce Workplace Discrimination

For the past four decades, Congress has acted to end workplace discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, or disability. The effort began with the 1963 Equal Pay Act, which required employers to provide equal pay for equal work. It continued with the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which contained a specific section dealing with equal employment opportunity, to be administered by the new Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The law prohibited racial discrimination in the hiring process and ordered the EEOC to investigate workers' complaints about discrimination.

Congress expanded the law in 1967 to prevent age discrimination and in 1990 passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to address discrimination against individuals with physical and mental disabilities. Under the ADA employers were ordered to make reasonable efforts to accommodate an employee's physical or mental disability. Because many complaints involve tough interpretations about what constitutes discrimination, the federal courts have played a critical role in enforcing the protections embedded in these laws.

Seven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reform Taxes

Since the 1960s Congress has made at least two major efforts to simplify the federal government's inscrutable income tax code. The first

was the 1964 Revenue Act, which overhauled the federal tax code and cut $11.4 billion in taxes for 1964 alone. The second was the 1986 Tax Reform Act, which cut rates again while collapsing fourteen different tax brackets into two. Congress also enacted a sweeping reorganization of the Internal Revenue Service in 1998 following allegations of taxpayer abuse.

Three major laws have supported this endeavor.

Reform Welfare

Even as it has worked to provide a social safety net for the needy, Congress has been striving to reduce dependency on public assistance among welfare recipients. A mix of carrots and sticks has been used to encourage welfare recipients to go to work, starting with the 1981 Omnibus Reconciliation Act, which cut federal funding for a number of welfare programs, including Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and Food Stamps on the theory that lower welfare benefits would drive recipients back to work. Congress tried a different approach when it passed the Family Support Act in 1988, which gave states broad authority to help welfare recipients find work through job training and job search support.

Congress passed its most significant welfare reform in 1996. Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Congress acted to "end welfare as we know it," as President Clinton had promised. The act put time limits on welfare benefits, required states to put at least half of all recipients to work by 2002, and cut federal welfare spending by 25 percent.

Three major laws have supported this endeavor.

Stabilize Agricultural Prices

Dating back to creation of the Department of Agriculture in 1862, Congress has long supported the farming industry, but it became more aggressively involved during and after the Great Depression that devastated farmers. Congress has tried to stabilize agricultural prices through three different approaches: the purchase of agricultural surpluses such as corn and barley; direct payments to farmers to

leave part of their land unplanted, thereby reducing the supply of agricultural goods; and price supports that raise the cost of commodities such as sugar.

These tactics have been employed throughout a long list of laws, including the 1985 Food Security Act, which provided $52 billion in new subsidies to address the farm crisis generated by high interest rates on land in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Another approach was taken in the 1954 Food for Peace program, which promoted agricultural exports as a way of boosting prices. Finally, in 1996 Congress completely overhauled the agriculture laws to reduce federal financial support.

Nineteen major laws have supported this endeavor.

Strengthen the Nation's Airways System

Congress has long believed that states and localities are responsible for building and maintaining airports, but the federal government is responsible for creating and maintaining an integrated coast-to-coast air traffic control system. It began helping states and localities build airports under the 1946 Federal Airport Act, which provided federal funds for the construction of new airports, and began building the modern air traffic control system under the 1958 Federal Aviation Act, which created the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

Over the decades Congress has invested billions in airport construction and modernization, and it ordered the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) to regulate and allocate travel routes to the airline industry and investigate accidents. Congress transferred the latter responsibility to the National Transportation Safety Board when it was created as part of the Department of Transportation in 1966 and then subsequently abolished the CAB as part of airline deregulation.

Five major laws have supported this endeavor.

Strengthen the Nation's Highway System

Congress likes nothing better than building roads and highways, if only because construction creates jobs and smooth roads back

home. It committed the federal government to doing so under the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act, which provided funds for an initial 42,000 miles of interstate highways. Congress expanded highway aid in 1982, 1987, 1991, and 1998. Each successive bill contained more special projects in the home districts of individual members of Congress. There were just 10 projects and $262 million when Congress enacted its 1982 highway bill, 152 projects and $1.4 billion when the bill came up for its ordinary renewal in 1987, 538 projects and $6.2 billion when it came up again in 1991, and 1,850 projects and $9.3 billion when it was renewed in 1998.

Seven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Strengthen the National Defense

The United States won the cold war in 1989, in part because it committed itself to building the world's strongest defense. Congress started almost immediately after World War II by creating the modern Department of Defense in 1947, which combined the Departments of War, Navy, Army, and Air Force into a single mega-entity. Congress also invested billions in the construction of new military bases under the 1963 Defense Base Construction Act.

Having constructed a vast defense establishment, Congress soon turned to the challenge of making the Defense Department run efficiently. It reorganized the department several times during the 1970s and 1980s to promote greater efficiency and coordination. In 1983 it provided the initial funds for President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, sometimes known as Star Wars, to intercept enemy ballistic missiles. With the cold war won by 1989, Congress then began to economize, starting with the 1988 Base Closure and Realignment Act, which produced a dramatic consolidation in the number of military bases around the country.

Seven major laws have supported this endeavor.

Support Veterans' Readjustment and Training

Part of building a strong defense involved helping veterans adjust to life after service. Congress began doing so in 1944 when it created

the landmark GI Bill. The law provided a variety of benefits to be managed by the Veterans Administration, including home loans, education subsidies, unemployment insurance, and health and burial benefits. Congress also required employers to give veterans special preference when hiring new workers. As the number of programs, veterans' hospitals, and needy veterans grew over the years, Congress added to the benefits package. By 1987 the list of programs was so large and the veterans' lobbying groups so powerful that Congress was compelled to elevate the Veterans Administration to cabinet status.

Five major laws have supported this endeavor.

PATTERNS OF ENDEAVOR

Beyond its value as a guide to what Congress asked the federal government to do in the last half of the twentieth century, the list of endeavors offers six initial lessons about how the federal government has sought to solve the problems of the past half-century. First, many of the endeavors listed above began before World War II ended. The Food and Drug Act of 1906, the Social Security Act of 1935, and the early attempts to reserve federal lands for national parks and monuments all provided a basis for subsequent actions. Congress has also protected scientific and technological inventions for more than 200 years by providing for registration and protection of patents. These examples demonstrate that Congress rarely invents an entirely new program when it launches or expands an endeavor.

Second, despite the prevailing scholarly focus on breakthrough statutes such as Medicare or welfare reform, most of what Congress has asked the federal government to do has involved a relatively large number of statutes passed over a relatively long period of time. Only eight of the fifty endeavors involved fewer than four major statutes: devolving responsibilities to the states, enhancing workplace safety, increasing access to health care for older Americans, promoting equal access to public accommodations, reforming welfare, and reforming

taxes all involved three major statutes; increasing access to health care for low-income families and maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf entailed two and one statute, respectively.

Remove these tightly focused endeavors from the list, and the average is nine statutes per endeavor. Promoting financial security in retirement involved the largest number of individual statutes, with twenty-one; followed by stabilizing agricultural price supports, with nineteen; and providing assistance to the working poor, with fifteen. Increasing the supply of low-income housing, ensuring an adequate energy supply, and improving mass transportation all entailed fourteen major statutes. Thus, almost by definition, great endeavors demand great endurance—a lesson often forgotten in the headlines about the latest legislative intrigue.

Third, many of the endeavors involve at least some effort to build or revitalize a federal agency or hire new civil servants as an instrument of implementation. Very few federal laws are self-implementing. Some require active enforcement; others require someone to write the checks, issue the food stamps, oversee the grants and contracts, or review the rules. Much as candidates and the public think government wastes too much money, they recognize that government organizations and employees are essential for sustaining an endeavor over time.

Rarely has the nation seen more striking evidence of this pattern than after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Trust in the federal government to do the right thing soared in the weeks following the tragedies, as did trust in the president, vice president, the president's appointees, and federal workers. Although this "rally 'round the flag" effect had dissipated by the following spring, with the passage of time and more aggressive news reporting on the intelligence and security failures that led to the September 11 attacks, the rise confirms the role of government in reassuring Americans that life will go on after crisis.

Fourth, 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 cross Democratic and Republican administrations alike. 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 sustained effort to contain communism. Great endeavors appear to require equally great consensus.

Fifth, several of the federal government's greatest endeavors were reactions to results of other great endeavors. Concerns about urban poverty increased as the interstate highway system spurred flight to the suburbs, increasing the income gap between inner cities and wealthier outlying areas. Pressure for welfare reform increased with worries about the dependency and potential abuse created by programs such as Food Stamps. The push for devolution intensified as the government in Washington became more involved in traditional state and local responsibilities such as crime fighting and K–12 education. And the demand for tax simplification increased as the tax code grew ever more complex with credits and loopholes designed to help various segments of the economy, be it science and technology, housing, agriculture, or defense. Thus, all fifty endeavors do not share the same vision of society.

Finally, government's greatest endeavors involved a mix of legislative strategies. Twenty-six of the fifty endeavors focused primarily on federal spending as a policy tool, including programs to provide health care to the elderly, increase homeownership, and stabilize agricultural prices. Another twenty 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 thirteen of the fifty 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.

CONCLUSION

Congress, past presidents, and the Supreme Court have asked the federal government to aim high these past fifty years. Despite what must have seemed to be insurmountable odds at the time, the federal government attacked a host of problems that no other sector, public or nonprofit, would have or could have touched. No one knew for sure that the United States could rebuild Europe after the destruction of World War II, send a man to the moon and bring him back safely, or end racial segregation in the voting booth, housing market, and public square. But the federal government did them all. No one knew for sure that the United States could make any progress on reducing disease, building an interstate highway system, helping the economy grow, or defeating communism. But again, the federal government made progress on them all.

The federal government sustained these efforts through long periods of domestic and foreign uncertainty. If the government could make progress on its greatest endeavors after the assassination of admired leaders such as President Kennedy and Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., the urban riots of the mid-1960s, the Oklahoma City terrorist bombing in 1995, the Korean and Vietnam Wars that took the lives of 100,000 young men and women, a long list of political scandals, one presidential impeachment, and one presidential resignation, it will most certainly continue making progress in the wake of the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001.

This does not mean that all of the federal government's endeavors have been successful, however. As the next chapter shows, some endeavors have produced remarkable success, at least as measured by the perceptions of some of the nation's leading scholars of American history and political science, while others have produced dismal failure. The central concern for the next chapter is not whether government tried hard to solve a long list of problems but whether it actually succeeded in solving tough, important problems. The list of government's greatest achievements of the past fifty years is based on the answer to that question.