Review: 'The Gifted Generation,' by David Goldfield

NONFICTION: Historian recounts the federal government's role in helping folks achieve the American dream.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune | DECEMBER 22, 2017 — 10:28AM

At the end of the 1950s, a substantial majority of Americans told pollsters they supported federal aid to public schools, Medicare, government enforcement of "fair treatment" in employment and housing for all citizens. More generally, 76 percent of respondents agreed that government intervention in domestic affairs was positive. A whopping 90 percent expressed confidence that "the government will do what is right."

Times — and opinions — have changed. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan told Americans that "the nine most terrifying words in the English language are I'm from the government and I'm here to help." By 2013, only 20 percent of Americans trusted government most or all of the time.

In "The Gifted Generation," a survey of American political history since 1945, David Goldfield, a professor at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, argues that in the three decades after the end of World War II, millions of Americans achieved the American dream. Since then, however, economic growth has slowed and income inequality has widened. The "major difference" between the two eras, Goldfield maintains, "is that the federal government's role as the great umpire, the great leveler, has diminished."

Goldfield is a skillful storyteller. He enlivens his narrative with anecdotes drawn from the experiences of "ordinary" Americans from the "gifted generation" who benefited from the New Deal, the Fair Deal and the Great Society.

Although some historians will find his account of the activist years too celebratory, too focused on change from the top down and too inclined to give presidents (especially Dwight Eisenhower on civil rights) more credit than they deserve, Goldfield’s interpretation does not depart from the conventional wisdom of professional historians (many of whom, including me, are liberals).

Along with many other scholars and political commentators, Goldfield claims that from 1945 to the 1970s progressive government initiatives opened opportunities for many, many Americans by providing a safety net (food, shelter, health care and jobs); a healthier environment; civil rights and voting rights for African-Americans; and greater equality for women.

Goldfield insists as well that more recent action by the federal government — to improve early childhood education; public schools; access to higher education; public transportation and infrastructure; access to health care; and a higher minimum wage — could have and would have materially enhanced the lives of millions of people.

The effectiveness and efficiency of most government policies are, of course, difficult to measure. And some policies are more successful than others. Some critics assert, moreover, that the state of the economy has a greater impact than a government program or basket of programs. Some may disagree with Goldfield that policies similar to those enacted by Scandinavian countries could have substantially reduced the dislocations ushered in by globalization and technological innovation.

To his credit, Goldfield presents data about the impact of many government programs, including college enrollments, the quality of the air we breathe and the number of black voters. However, "The Gifted Generation" does not provide a definitive answer to an important question: Under what conditions does more government produce good government?
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

The Gifted Generation
By: David Goldfield.
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