

WHY AMERICAN HISTORY IS NOT WHAT THEY SAY:

AN INTRODUCTION TO REVISIONISM

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“Now there are some who would like to rewrite history—
revisionist historians is what I like to call them.”

—**GEORGE W. BUSH**

June 16, 2003

History, *n.* An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools.

—AMBROSE BIERCE

The Devil's Dictionary (1906)

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PREFACE

Americans have been warring with each other for more than a century over the contents of the American history textbooks used in the nation's high schools and colleges. Nor is the reason far to seek. If, as seems to be the case, these textbooks encompass one hundred percent of the information that most high school and college graduates in this country will ever encounter on the subject of American history, the American history wars would appear to be well worth fighting. For what Americans know and understand about the history of the society in which they live will determine the degree of their willingness to honor and preserve its ideals and traditions. More than that: it will determine *what they regard as the ideals and traditions of their society*. It will determine nothing less than the kind of society they will seek to strengthen and perpetuate.

Until very recently, however, the range of the conflict over American history textbooks was narrow indeed. All sides tacitly agreed that the story of the United States was the triumphant tale of a people fervently devoted to peace, prosperity, and individual liberty; a people left utterly untempted by opportunities of the kind that had led so many other nations down the ignoble road of empire; a people who went to war only as a last resort and only when both individual liberty and Western Civilization itself were imperiled and at stake. There had been injustices along the way, of course—the Native Americans had been grossly mistreated, as had the African Americans. Women had been denied the vote and even the right to own property. Yet these injustices had been corrected in time, and the formerly mistreated groups had been integrated into full citizenship and full participation in the liberty, prosperity, and peace that were the birthright of every American—the very same liberty, prosperity, and peace that had made America itself a beacon of hope to the entire world.

So the consensus view of American history has long had it, at any rate. And so almost all the textbooks involved in the American history

wars waged before the 1980s had it, too. The only question at issue back then, really, was whether any given textbook gave one or another of the various formerly aggrieved groups what was felt to be its proper due. Was the suffering of the Native Americans (or the African Americans or the women) detailed at sufficient length? The many contributions the African Americans (or the women or the Native Americans) had made to American culture—contributions without which American culture would simply not be the same—were these detailed sufficiently? The nobility of the female (or the Native American or the African American) leaders who helped bring about recognition of their people's rights—was this sufficiently stressed?

Then, a little over a quarter-century ago, the terms of the debate changed—radically. One might say the opening salvo in the new American history wars was fired by Howard Zinn, in the form of a textbook entitled *A People's History of the United States*. First published in 1980, this volume is still in print, was reissued in a revised, updated, “20th Anniversary Edition” in the year 2000, and has become one of the most widely influential college level textbooks on American history currently in use in this country. Today, Zinn faces intensified competition, however, not only from peddlers of the traditional, America-as-pure-and-virtuous-beacon-of-liberty-prosperity-and-peace version of our past, but also from a number of other writers who have, in varying degree, adopted the rather different view of American history that Zinn himself promotes.

This alternative vision sees America's past as a series of betrayals by political leaders of all major parties, in which the liberal ideals on which this country was founded have been gradually abandoned and replaced by precisely the sorts of illiberal ideals that America officially deplors. In effect, say Howard Zinn and a growing chorus of others, we have become the people our founding fathers warned us (and tried to protect us) against. And what may be the most significant fact about this alternative or “revisionist” view of American history is the remarkably hospitable reception it has enjoyed both from the general public and from the selfsame educational establishment that only a few short years ago was assiduously teaching students something else entirely.

How can we account for this? Why, suddenly, is there a substantial market for a version of American history quite unlike anything most Americans had ever encountered? Why are the combatants in the current American history wars so different from each other, so different in their fundamental assumptions about America? Why are the current

wars so much bloodier (figuratively speaking), so much more intense, than ever before?

It seems to me that the correct answer to this question is complex and multifaceted. It seems to me that several different forces are at work here simultaneously, combining synergistically to produce the “single” effect we call “our current American history wars.” One of these forces is generational change. It was in the 1980s that college and university history departments came to be dominated by a new generation of historians—historians who had earned their Ph.Ds in the 1960s and ’70s and who had been strongly influenced in their thinking about American history by a group of “revisionist” historians, the so-called “New Left Historians,” whose books were widely popular and widely controversial at that time. These “New Left Historians”—William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Gar Alperovitz, a number of others—had in turn been strongly influenced by an earlier group of “revisionists”—the so-called “New Historians” or “Progressive Historians”—whose most prominent figures included Charles A. Beard and Harry Elmer Barnes.

Another of the forces involved in the recent heating up of the perennial American history wars was the brilliant critical and popular success, during the 1970s and early 1980s, of the first three books in Gore Vidal’s six-volume “American Chronicle” series of historical novels about the United States. *Burr* (1973), *1876* (1976), and *Lincoln* (1984) were enormous successes. They proved beyond any doubt that the public would not rise up in indignation and smite any author who dared to question the motives and the wisdom of even the most venerated American presidents. They proved that there was, in fact, a substantial market for just such skepticism about the glorious American past.

Partisans of the America-as-pure-and-virtuous-beacon-of-liberty-prosperity-and-peace mythology attacked Vidal’s novels, of course, but Vidal made it quite clear in a couple of detailed replies to his critics (first published in the *New York Review of Books*) that he knew at least as much about the history of the periods he depicted in his novels as any of them did—Ph.Ds and members of the professoriate though they might be. Still, doubts lingered in more than a few minds. First there was the problem of Vidal’s well known political views and his high-profile activities as a polemicist and proselytizer for those views. Could a man so opinionated be counted upon to provide an objective account of America’s past? Second, there was the problem of historical fiction. Was it really advisable to take any work of *fiction* seriously as a source of information about *history*? Fiction was . . . well, you know—*fiction*.

It was “made up.” How could we rely on any information we picked up about the events of the past from reading such a work?

To answer these questions properly, it will be necessary to take a brief but closely focused look at the discipline of history itself. How does an historian go about determining the truth as regards the past? Is the historian’s methodology in any way similar to the fiction writer’s? Is the work the historian writes in any way similar to a novel? Is it really appropriate to dismiss historical fiction as “made up,” while looking to the writings of historians for an objective assessment of past events?

And so we begin

ONE

THE ART OF HISTORY

I

Objectivity in History

It is two decades now since University of Chicago historian Peter Novick published his landmark work *That Noble Dream*, a gloomy analysis of “the objectivity question” and its importance for the American historical profession. In 1989, *That Noble Dream* won the American Historical Association’s prize for the best book of the year in American history. From the date of its original publication a year earlier, it attracted much, and heated, attention. Yet, in all the years that have passed since its first appearance, little or no progress has been made toward any sort of solution for the conundrum Novick posed in his book.

On the one hand, Novick argued, the “ideal of ‘objectivity’” had long been “the rock” on which “the professional historical venture” in this country “was constituted, its continuing *raison d’être*. It has been the quality which the profession has prized and praised above all others—whether in historians or in their works. It has been the key term in defining progress in historical scholarship: moving ever closer to the objective truth about the past.”¹ On the other hand, this ideal of objectivity is “essentially confused.” It is based on “philosophical assumptions” that are “dubious.” It is “psychologically and sociologically naïve. As a practical matter, I think it promotes an unreal and misleading invidious distinction between, on the one hand, historical accounts ‘distorted’ by ideological assumptions and purposes; on the other, history free of these taints.”²

¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

For, of course, there is no history that is free of such “taints.” In a post to an e-mail discussion group on December 12, 1995, Novick noted that

[i]n writing a work of history, the historian inevitably [...] is *radically selective*, choosing from among the infinite number of (“true”) facts which *could* be recorded a small portion which he or she *will* record. Further, also inevitably, some are *centered*, others *marginalized*. And all of them are necessarily *arranged*, in different ways. Selection, centering, and arrangement are *inherent in the process*; and are typically *decisive* in determining the sort of picture which emerges.³

And yet, to say all this is barely to have scratched the surface of the problem. For before the historian can select, center, marginalize, or arrange the facts, he or she must first *ascertain* the facts. And this is by no means as unproblematical a matter as at first it might seem.

“The past is never dead,” the attorney Gavin Stevens declares in William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*. “It’s not even past.”⁴ What he means by this is plain enough to anyone who has ever taken a stroll through any of our older American cities—Boston, for example, or New York or Philadelphia or San Francisco. Walking through such a place, one passes, like a geologist, through what Carl Gustavson calls “a present world which is also the world of the past,” a world in which “outcroppings” of the past—buildings, statues, place names, institutions, and even transportation infrastructure (like San Francisco’s famous cable car tracks)—appear cheek by jowl and fully contemporaneous with buildings, statues, place names, institutions, and transportation infrastructure established only within the last few years, or at least within living memory.⁵ Stevens was right. The past is still here. It is all around us, inescapable, no matter how we may try to shatter the bonds that tie us to it.

There is a problem, however. For not all of the past is still here. Some of it is still here. But the rest—the majority—is indeed past, gone, inaccessible. The historian, in studying the past, “is at a great disadvantage when compared to the trained journalist on the spot,” wrote Harry Elmer Barnes, for that journalist “witnessed the events at first hand.” The historian, by contrast, “can never have more than a secondhand and remote contact with the issues, events and peoples he is seeking to describe.”⁶ Still, the historian, in putting together the best possible

3 See http://www-english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/novick_debate.html

4 William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 92.

5 Carl G. Gustavson, *A Preface to History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), p.16.

6 Harry Elmer Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1938), p. 370.

secondhand account, can make productive use of such buildings, statues, place names, institutions, and transportation infrastructure as may remain from the time in question. Mainly, however, s/he will tend to rely on documents. “The reason,” John Tosh reminds us, “is not just academic conservatism. From the High Middle Ages (c. 1000-1300) onwards, the written word survives in greater abundance than any other source for Western history.”⁷

The surviving written word is of a number of types. There are published and unpublished sources. The unpublished sources include the diaries, journals, and letters of individuals; the records and correspondence of those engaged in business enterprises; and the paperwork generated by government at all its levels. The published sources include flyers, pamphlets, almanacs, catalogues, newspapers, magazines, and books. Far and away the most important of these latter—“the most important published primary source for the historian,” Tosh calls it—is the daily newspaper. Nor should this be surprising. Newspapers “record the political and social views which made most impact at the time”; moreover, they “provide a day-to-day record of events” and “from time to time present the results of more thorough enquiries into issues which lie beyond the scope of routine news-reporting.”⁸

On the other hand, daily newspapers are by no means perfect sources of information for the historian. As Tosh notes,

the very fact of publication sets a limit on the value of [...] these sources. They contain only what was considered to be fit for public consumption—what governments were prepared to reveal, what journalists could elicit from tight-lipped informants, what editors thought would gratify their readers, or [politicians] their constituents. In each case there is a controlling purpose which may limit, distort or falsify what is said.⁹

More important, “they recount only what people found worthy of note about their own age—which may not be what interests us today.”¹⁰

Then, too, even if newspaper accounts of events did focus on what interests us today, and even if the reporters and editors responsible for them were able to gain access to the information they sought, there would still be the age-old problem of journalistic incompetence. A hun-

7 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Longman, 1991), p. 31.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

dred years ago, George Bernard Shaw satirized it in *The Doctor's Dilemma* in the person of an unnamed character, The Newspaper Man,

a cheerful, affable young man who is disabled for ordinary business pursuits by a congenital erroneousness which renders him incapable of describing accurately anything he sees, or understanding or reporting accurately anything he hears. As the only employment in which these defects do not matter is journalism (for a newspaper, not having to act on its descriptions and reports, but only to sell them to idly curious people, has nothing but honor to lose by inaccuracy and unveracity), he has perforce become a journalist, and has to keep up an air of high spirits through a daily struggle with his own illiteracy and the precariousness of his employment.¹¹

Fifty years ago, H. L. Mencken did not find the situation markedly improved. “The more reflective reader,” he wrote “reads next to nothing” in the way of newspapers

and believes the same amount precisely. Why should he read or believe more? Every time he alights on anything that impinges upon his own field of knowledge he discovers at once that it is inaccurate and puerile. The essential difficulty here is that journalism, to be intellectually respectable, requires a kind of equipment in its practitioner that is necessarily rare in the world [...]. He should have the widest conceivable range of knowledge, and he should be the sort of man who is not easily deluded by the specious and the fraudulent. Obviously, there are not enough such men to go round. The best newspaper, if it is lucky, may be able to muster half a dozen at a given moment, but the average newspaper seldom has even one. Thus American journalism (like the journalism of any other country) is predominantly paltry and worthless. Its pretensions are enormous, but its achievements are insignificant.¹²

And today, according to the late David Shaw, longtime media critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, the situation detailed by Bernard Shaw and by Mencken persists. “I’ve long since lost track,” Shaw reported to his readers on May 22, 2005, not long before his death, “of the number of times that readers from all walks of life have told me, ‘Any time I read anything in the paper that I know anything about, it’s wrong.’”¹³

Consider then the plight of the historian dependent upon newspaper accounts for his information about a period, a series of events, the

¹¹ Bernard Shaw, *The Doctor's Dilemma: A Tragedy* (London: Penguin, 1946), pp.167-168.

¹² H. L. Mencken, *Minority Report: H. L. Mencken's Notebooks* (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 74.

¹³ See <http://poynter.org/dg.lts/id.45/aid.82799/column.htm>

doings and sayings of an historical figure—the “facts” which are his principal concern. “The historian possesses the advantage of better perspective on the events recorded in the newspapers,” according to Barnes, “and he can check and compare the reports submitted in the various newspapers. Yet, his results cannot, in the end, be more accurate than the sources which he has used.”¹⁴

Of course, newspapers do not stand embarrassed and alone with regard to these deficiencies. Quite the contrary, for, as John Tosh observes, “[m]any primary sources are inaccurate, muddled, based on hearsay or intended to mislead,” and, indeed, “the majority of sources are in some way inaccurate, incomplete or tainted by prejudice and self-interest.”¹⁵

So some of the facts the historian needs are inaccessible and much of what is accessible is also unreliable. But never mind all that. When it comes to the facts of history, we have what we have, and whatever its deficiencies we must make do with it. Novick emphasizes, as we have seen, that history is “radically selective.” Tosh agrees. “The facts are not given,” he writes, “they are selected.” Moreover,

Historical writing of all kinds is determined as much by what it leaves out as by what it puts in. That is why it makes sense to distinguish [...] between the facts of the past and the facts of history. The former are limitless and in their entirety unknowable; the latter represent a selection made by successive historians for the purpose of historical reconstruction and explanation.

But “[i]f historical facts are selected, it is important to identify the criteria employed in selecting them. Are there commonly shared principles, or is it a matter of personal whim?”¹⁶

The answer, of course, is neither—or, perhaps, both. To some extent the criteria *will* be personal—though, for all that, not necessarily whimsical; and such commonly shared principles as may exist may not necessarily redound to the benefit of those who seek useful information from their study of history. Consider, as a case in point, the commonly shared principles that informed most high-school-and-college-level textbook writing in the field of American history until very, very recently. The American history taught in most schools during the past hundred years faithfully reflected received opinion, and received opinion sees the United States as a consistent, devoted partisan of the same spirit of individual liberty that once moved its Founders—

¹⁴ Barnes, *op.cit.*, p. 370.

¹⁵ Tosh, *op.cit.*, pp. 33, 65-66.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

a peace-loving nation that wishes the rest of the world only the best and never goes to war except in self-defense (or in defense of Western Civilization itself).

Apply this set of principles to what we know of the past and, at the end of the day, you'll wind up with quite a pile of facts that didn't meet the criteria for selection and now litter the cutting room floor. The facts about the gross violations of individual liberty that have been championed by U.S. presidents almost since the beginning, for example—John Adams's Sedition Acts, Andrew Jackson's genocidal treatment of the American Indians, Abraham Lincoln's military conscription (to say nothing of his suspension of *habeas corpus* and his imprisonment of newspaper editors who dared to disagree with his prosecution of the Civil War), William McKinley's brutal suppression of the independence movement in the Philippines after the Spanish American War, Franklin Roosevelt's order to round up American citizens of Japanese ancestry and imprison them in concentration camps—are any of these inconvenient facts likely to be selected for inclusion in a textbook based on the “commonly shared principle” of the saintliness of the U.S. government?

But if John Tosh is correct, the only alternative to such “commonly shared principles” is “personal whim.” As Harry Elmer Barnes put it,

[a] historical fact refers to a specific concatenation of circumstances which was both born and terminated at the moment of its occurrence. When we say that we have discovered a historical fact we actually mean only that we have acquired information which allows us to make a highly subjective and incomplete reconstruction of one or more of the elements which once existed in a now extinct historical situation. No one can ever entirely recreate this historical entity and, in general, we make of a historical fact essentially what we put into it as a result of our subjective imagination.¹⁷

When Barnes refers to the historian's “reconstruction” of an historical event as “highly subjective,” when he declares that what “we make of a historical fact” is “essentially what we put into it,” using “our subjective imagination,” this may sound at first like a warning of impending disaster. Surely if every historian relied on “subjective imagination” as the basis for selecting facts, no two historical accounts would agree, and the discipline of history would be plunged into chaos.

¹⁷ Barnes, op.cit., p. 267.

II

History and Fiction

But we should calm ourselves; no such outcome looms on the horizon. To understand why, we should turn our attention at least briefly to what may seem at first an obvious irrelevancy—namely, the world of imaginative literature, and particularly fiction. Today, history is regarded, if not as one of the social sciences, then at least as an independent discipline that deals in facts, not fancies; in edification, not entertainment. But it was not always thus. Harry Elmer Barnes reports that before the 18th Century, “there had been either no attempt to cite sources or else the citations had been hopelessly confused; there had been no general practice of establishing the genuineness of a text; there had been little hesitancy in altering the text of a document to improve the style.”¹⁸ And even after the 18th Century itself had begun to fade into history, the new standards Barnes describes had still not really become universal. On the contrary: “Prior to the French Revolution,” Hayden White writes,

historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art. [...] The eighteenth century abounds in works which distinguish between the study of history on the one side and the writing of history on the other. The writing was a literary, specifically rhetorical exercise, and the product of this exercise was to be assessed as much on literary as on scientific principles.”¹⁹

In point of fact, until late in the 19th Century, most historians regarded themselves neither as social scientists (a concept that did not even exist before the 19th Century) nor as humanistic scholars, but rather as literary men, men of letters. The stories they were telling were true, of course, but nonetheless they were telling stories, just as though they were novelists, and their job, as they saw it, was to tell their stories as vividly and poetically as any novelist. Peter Novick reports that

George Bancroft, William Lothrop Motley, William H. Prescott, and Francis Parkman [...] each, in at least one of their major works, employed the organization of the stage play, with a prologue, five acts, and an epilogue. Sir Walter Scott was, by a wide margin, the most

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 241.

¹⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 123.

popular and imitated author in the early-nineteenth-century United States, and the florid style of the “literary” historians gave clear evidence of his influence.²⁰

And not only did the most representative 19th Century historians think of themselves as litterateurs, most of them saw themselves in particular as the providers of an important kind of inspirational literature. As Novick puts it,

[t]he “gentleman amateurs” wrote not to keep the pot boiling, or out of professional obligation to colleagues, but because they had an urgent message to deliver to the general reading public. “If ten people in the world hate despotism a little more and love civil and religious liberty a little better in consequence of what I have written, I shall be satisfied,” Motley wrote.²¹

More specifically, most of the 19th Century American historians were convinced that, as Peter Charles Hoffer writes,

by celebrating our history we might heal our political differences. Look to the Founders, these historical boosters argued; praise, exalt, and honor them. Ignore their faults and failings, for the message must be an uplifting one to which everyone can subscribe. The greatest of the Founders, George Washington, became at the hands of the itinerant bookseller and preacher Mason Weems an unblemished paragon of virtue, whose “great talents, constantly guided and guarded by religion he put at the service of his country.”²²

Of course, in order to transform George Washington into “an unblemished paragon of virtue,” Weems had to exercise a bit of literary license, even making up one of his most famous anecdotes—that of the young Washington and the cherry tree—out of whole cloth.

But Weems was far from alone in employing such techniques. As Hoffer puts it, “Against the vast profit perceived in this approach, what reader could object to the historians’ rearrangement of their subjects’ language, or to their selective use of facts?” Hoffer calls attention to “an 1835 edition of Washington’s letters, edited by Reverend Jared Sparks,” in which the editor “regularly altered Washington’s words” and “sometimes pasted one piece of a document into another document entirely.” Yet, so far as readers and other historians were concerned, “[i]t did not

20 Novick, *op.cit.*, pp. 44-45.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

22 Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud—American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesisles, Ellis, and Goodwin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 18-19.

seem to matter [...]. After all, the entire purpose of editing the letters was moral instruction, and ministers like Sparks long had the tradition of cutting and pasting Scripture in their sermons.”²³

Hoffer also suggests that we take a close look at George Bancroft’s “monumental ten-volume *History of the United States*, the last volume of which appeared in 1874. Bancroft’s *History* was to become the standard work on American history for generations. [...] When he died in 1891, he was the most honored of our historians, and his works were widely read.” Bancroft “believed that his job was to write a chronicle that would make his readers proud of their country’s history,” Hoffer tells us,

[a]nd when it suited his didactic purposes, he fabricated. He “felt free [as Bancroft himself explained in the preface to his great work] to change tenses or moods, to transpose parts of quotations, to simplify language, and to give free renditions.” If the purpose of history was to tell stories that taught lessons, such “blending” could hardly be objectionable, and for contemporary reviewers, it was not.²⁴

Hoffer notes that Bancroft was also sloppy about crediting his sources. For example, he “made no real distinction between primary sources and secondary sources. When a secondary source cited a passage from a primary source, Bancroft felt perfectly free to reuse the language of the secondary source in his own account without identifying it as such. He cited the secondary-source pages, but copied or closely paraphrased rather than quoted.” After all, a work of history was a work of literature, was it not? All that really mattered was whether the passage in question fit into the flow of the style, whether it fit artistically into the work—not whether it was accompanied by some sort of footnote!

It was the tail end of the 19th Century before the calling of the historian had been professionalized and academicized to such an extent that a majority of practitioners in the field had come to hold the view of their discipline that we now take for granted—the historian as dispassionate seeker after truth, a scholar, much more like an anthropologist or sociologist than a novelist or playwright. Still, there were holdouts. The long tradition of historical works written by novelists and poets and offered frankly, not as scholarship but as lovely letters, died particularly hard. In the 1890s, just as the new social-scientist paradigm was at last coming to dominate the historical profession, Edgar Saltus, a then very popular and successful writer who is now utterly forgotten, was putting the finishing touches on his best known and most frequently reprinted

²³ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

book, *Imperial Purple* (1892), a specimen of what Claire Sprague calls “a genre almost non-existent today—history decked in the colorful impressionism of the magazine essay of the last [19th] century.”²⁵ Before his death in 1921, Saltus would also do for Russia’s Romanov dynasty what he had done for the Caesars of imperial Rome in *Imperial Purple*. *The Imperial Orgy* was brought out by Boni and Liveright in 1920.

A few years later, the renowned poet Carl Sandburg would begin publishing an even more ambitious work, though one quite as free of footnotes or bibliography as Saltus’s works had been—a six-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln. “The two volumes of *The Prairie Years* were the publishing event of 1926,” reports James Hurt, “and the four volumes of *The War Years* were an equal success in 1939.”²⁶ As late as 1969, Richard Cobb, whom John Tosh describes as “a leading historian of the French Revolution,” could write of the historian that “*His principal aim is to make the dead live*. And, like the American ‘mortician,’ he may allow himself a few artifices of the trade: a touch of rouge here, a pencil-stroke there, a little cotton wool in the cheeks, to make the operation more convincing.”²⁷ Only five years later, in 1974, the late Shelby Foote, who made his early reputation as a novelist, published the last volume of what *The New York Times* called his “2,934-page, three-volume, 1.5 million-word military history, *The Civil War: A Narrative*,” a work characterized by “punctilious, but defiantly unfootnoted research.” It was immensely popular, earning “considerably more in royalties than any of his novels had earned,” and winning him an invitation to serve as a consultant and onscreen expert for the “smash hit” Ken Burns documentary on the war, a job that made Foote into “a prime-time star.”²⁸

It is difficult indeed to ignore the many similarities between the historian’s task and that of the novelist. As Hayden White writes, “[v]iewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another.” Moreover,

the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of “reality.” The novelist may present his notion of this reality indirectly, that is to say,

²⁵ Claire Sprague, *Edgar Saltus* (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 72.

²⁶ James Hurt, “Sandburg’s *Lincoln* Within History.” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*. Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter 1999), p. 55.

²⁷ Tosh, op.cit., pp. 23-24.

²⁸ See Douglas Martin, “Shelby Foote, Historian and Novelist, Dies at 88.” *The New York Times* 29 June 2005. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/29/books/29foote.html?pagewanted=all>

by figurative techniques, rather than directly, which is to say, by registering a series of propositions which are supposed to correspond point by point to some extra-textual domain of occurrence or happening, as the historian claims to do. But the image of reality which the novelist thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less “real” than that referred to by the historian.²⁹

To achieve this common end of “providing a verbal image of ‘reality,’” both historians and novelists tell stories. “The late R. G. Collingwood insisted,” White reminds us,

that the historian was above all a story teller and suggested that historical sensibility was manifested in the capacity to make a plausible story out of a congeries of “facts” which, in their unprocessed form, made no sense at all. In their efforts to make sense of the historical record, which is fragmentary and always incomplete, historians have to make use of what Collingwood called “the constructive imagination,” which told the historian—as it tells the competent detective—what “must have been the case” given the available evidence [...].

“Collingwood suggested,” according to White, “that historians come to their evidence endowed with a sense of the *possible* forms that different kinds of recognizably human situations *can* take. He called this sense the nose for the ‘story’ contained in the evidence or for the ‘true’ story that was buried in or hidden behind the ‘apparent’ story.”³⁰ Journalists, those historians in a hurry who provide what legendary *Washington Post* publisher Phillip Graham famously called the “first rough draft of [...] history” (and whose rough draft not infrequently becomes the final draft), make a very similar distinction. You either have a “nose for news,” they say—good “news sense,” good “news judgment”—or you don’t. If you do, you can see the story contained in the evidence, the true story buried or hidden behind the apparent (or, sometimes, the official) story.

The important point here is that describing any historical event, whether one that took place yesterday or one that took place a century ago, by telling a story is inescapably an act of imagination. As White sketches the problem,

traditional historiography has featured predominantly the belief that history itself consists of a congeries of lived stories, individual and collective, and that the principal task of historians is to uncover these

²⁹ White, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

stories and to retell them in a narrative, the truth of which would reside in the correspondence of the story told to the story lived by real people in the past.³¹

Yet, “real events do not offer themselves as stories [...]”³² In fact,

the notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries. Does the world really represent itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see “the end” in every beginning? Or does it present itself [...] either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude?³³

In short, “stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions. Which means, of course, that they can be true only in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which a figure of speech can be true.”³⁴

A metaphor is a lie that conveys truth—or, at any rate, what the maker of the metaphor regards as truth. “Men are pigs.” “The world is a ghetto.” “The years are gusts of wind, and we are the leaves they carry away.”³⁵ Taken literally, all these statements are untrue. They are falsehoods, lies. Taken figuratively, however, each of them conveys an arguable truth about its subject. A novel—a long, elaborate lie, involving the events in the lives of wholly imaginary human beings—is a metaphor for human life in the world as we know it. In this sense, every work of fiction is philosophical, because every work of fiction conveys an at least implicit statement about or judgment upon the human condition.

This does not mean that every fiction writer is also a philosopher or even philosophical by temperament. Consider, in regard to this issue, the testimony of three fiction writers who *are* also, in some sense,

³¹ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. ix-x.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁴ Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 9.

³⁵ The last of my three examples of metaphor is attributed to the French poet, novelist, and playwright Philippe Auguste Mathias de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (1838-1889). The second example is taken from the title of a hit popular song of 1972, written and performed by the rhythm and blues band War.

philosophers: Jean Paul Sartre, William H. Gass, and Ayn Rand.³⁶ According to Gass, “fiction, in the manner of its making, is pure philosophy,” and “the novelist and the philosopher are companions in a common enterprise, though they go about it in different ways.”³⁷ “The esthetic aim of any fiction,” he writes, “is the creation of a verbal world [...], often as intricate and rigorous as any mathematic, often as simple and undemanding as a baby’s toy, from whose nature, as from our own world, a philosophical system may be inferred [...]”³⁸ Moreover, “the world the novelist makes is always a metaphorical model of our own.”³⁹ Nevertheless, “[t]he philosophy that most writers embody in their work [...] is usually taken unconsciously from the tradition with which the writer is allied.” Alternatively, “[h]e may have represented, in just the confused way it existed, the world his generation saw and believed they lived in [...]”⁴⁰

Rand agrees. “The art of any given period or culture,” she writes, “is a faithful mirror of that culture’s philosophy.” This is so because “[s]ome sort of philosophical meaning [...], some *implicit* view of life, is a necessary element of a work of art.” Art is “the voice of philosophy.”⁴¹ Indeed, in a sense, art is the language we employ to express philosophical ideas.

Just as language converts abstractions into the psycho-epistemological equivalent of concretes, into a manageable number of specific units—so art converts man’s metaphysical abstractions into the equivalent of concretes, into specific entities open to man’s direct perception. The claim that “art is a universal language is not an empty metaphor, it is literally true [...].”

36 Sartre published works of technical philosophy (*Being and Nothingness*), novels (*Nausea*), and plays (*No Exit*). Rand did the same (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *The Night of January 16th*). Gass’s case is a bit different. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Cornell and calls his meeting with Ludwig Wittgenstein there in the 1950s “the most important intellectual experience of my life.” (*Fiction and the Figures of Life*, p. 248) He earned his living as a philosophy professor for nearly fifty years, first at Purdue, latterly at Washington University in St. Louis, from which he retired in 2001. His publications have all been literary in character, including novels (*Omensetter’s Luck*), short stories (*In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*), belles lettres (*On Being Blue*), and literary criticism (*Fiction and the Figures of Life*).

37 William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970), pp. 3, 5.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

41 Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature* (New York: World, 1969), pp. 79, 50, 28.

The philosophical ideas that are “in the air,” taken for granted, during the lifetime of a fiction writer need not, cannot, be the only source of the philosophical ideas that find their way into that fiction writer’s fiction, however. Another source, one drawn upon by many novelists, is religion, which Rand calls “the primitive form of philosophy.”⁴² Still another, drawn upon inescapably by every fiction writer, is the individual writer’s “sense of life.”

“A sense of life,” Rand wrote in 1966, “is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence.”

Long before he is old enough to grasp such a concept as metaphysics, man makes choices, forms value-judgments, experiences emotions and acquires a certain *implicit* view of life. Every choice and value-judgment implies some estimate of himself and of the world around him—most particularly, of his capacity to deal with the world. He may draw conscious conclusions, which may be true or false; or he may remain mentally passive and merely react to events (i.e., merely feel). Whatever the case may be, his subconscious mechanism sums up his psychological activities, integrating his conclusions, reactions or evasions into an emotional sum that establishes a habitual pattern and becomes his automatic response to the world around him. What began as a series of single, discrete conclusions (or evasions) about his own particular problems, becomes a generalized feeling about existence, an implicit *metaphysics* with the compelling motivational power of a constant, basic emotion—an emotion which is part of all his other emotions and underlies all his experiences. *This* is a sense of life.⁴³

According to Rand, “[t]he key concept, in the formation of a sense of life, is the term ‘*important*,’” and it is crucial that we understand, she says, that

“[i]mportant”—in its essential meaning, as distinguished from its more limited and superficial uses—is a *metaphysical* term. It pertains to that aspect of metaphysics which serves as a bridge between metaphysics and ethics: to a fundamental view of man’s nature. That view involves the answers to such questions as whether the universe is knowable or not, whether man has the power of choice or not, whether he can achieve his goals in life or not. The answers to such questions are “metaphysical value-judgments,” since they form the basis of ethics.

⁴² Ibid., p. 23.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 31–32.

In the end, “[i]t is only those values which he regards or grows to regard as ‘important,’ those which represent his implicit view of reality, that remain in a man’s subconscious and form his sense of life.”⁴⁴

And what has all this to do with fiction writing? Everything, for, as Rand puts it, “[e]sthetic abstractions are formed by the criterion of: what is *important*?” Another way of saying this is that “[a]n artist [...] selects those aspects of existence which he regards as metaphysically significant—and by isolating and stressing them, by omitting the insignificant and accidental, he presents *his* view of existence.”⁴⁵ Thus, particularly among those fiction writers who are unphilosophical, but to some extent among all fiction writers, “[i]t is the artist’s sense of life that controls and integrates his work, directing the innumerable choices he has to make, from the choice of subject to the subtlest details of style.”⁴⁶ Accordingly, Rand defines art as “a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value-judgments.”⁴⁷

Needless to say, then, by publishing a novel, a novelist displays his metaphysical value-judgments, his sense of life, for all to see. As Rand puts it, “nothing is as potent as art in exposing the essence of a man’s character. An artist reveals his naked soul in his work [...]”⁴⁸ Sartre saw the same phenomenon. Literary artists, he wrote, are noted for “the involuntary expression of their souls. I say involuntary because the dead, from Montaigne to Rimbaud, have painted themselves completely, but without having meant to—it is something they have simply thrown into the bargain.”⁴⁹ They could hardly have done otherwise, however, Sartre notes, for

[i]f I fix on canvas or in writing a certain aspect of the fields or the sea or a look on someone’s face which I have disclosed, I am conscious of having produced them by condensing relationships, by introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things. That is, I feel myself essential in relation to my creation.⁵⁰

For when it comes to “the unique point of view from which the author can present the world,” it is always and everywhere true that “if our cre-

44 Ibid., pp. 34-35.

45 Ibid., p. 46.

46 Ibid., pp. 43-44.

47 Ibid., p. 22.

48 Ibid., p. 55.

49 Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (New York: Citadel, 1962), p. 32.

50 Ibid., p. 39.

ative drive comes from the very depths of our heart, then we never find anything but ourselves in our work.”⁵¹

But of course, all this is true of historians as well. Most historians are no more philosophically minded than most fiction writers. On the contrary, they are notoriously “sceptical of abstraction,” as John Gray put it not long ago in the *New Statesman*.⁵² Yet every work they produce has philosophical implications, provides support for various general ideas—ideas about the nature of government, for example, and the utility of war, and the way national economies work. Where do these ideas come from, in the works of unphilosophical historians wary of “loose generalization” (as Gray puts it)? Some of them are inherited, so to speak, from earlier practitioners of the historian’s particular area of specialization. Some are absorbed unthinkingly from the culture in which the historian grows up and matures. Still others are provided by sense of life. For every historian has a sense of life, just as every fiction writer does—a set of “metaphysical value-judgments” built up subconsciously over years of living until they provide a sort of “automatic response to the world” and an automatic answer to such questions as “whether the universe is knowable or not, whether man has the power of choice or not, whether he can achieve his goals in life or not.” How any given historian has inwardly answered such questions will exercise considerable influence over what that historian regards as a realistic view of government, war, and economics—and, thus, how that historian treats these subjects in his or her work.

It is little wonder, then, that Roy A. Childs, Jr., ever an assiduous student of Ayn Rand, offered the following definition of history in his influential essay, “Big Business and the Rise of American Statism”: “History is a selective recreation of the events of the past, according to a historian’s premises regarding what is important and his judgment concerning the nature of causality in human action.”⁵³ Childs saw clearly that the historian proceeds much as the fiction writer proceeds, and obtains similar results. Nor was he alone in doing so. John Tosh writes that “[i]n many instances the sources do not directly address the central issues of historical explanation at all. [...] Questions of historical explanation

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 63, 40.

⁵² See his review of Peter Watson’s *Ideas: A History from Fire to Freud* in the *New Statesman* for 28 May 2005. Online at <http://www.newstatesman.com/Bookshop/300000098646>

⁵³ Roy A. Childs, Jr., “Big Business and the Rise of American Statism,” in *Liberty Against Power: Essays by Roy A. Childs, Jr.*, ed. Joan Kennedy Taylor (San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1994), p. 18.

cannot, therefore, be resolved solely by reference to the evidence. Historians are also guided [...] by their reading of human nature [...].”⁵⁴ The legendary economist and social theorist Ludwig von Mises notes that any historical writing “is necessarily conditioned by the historian’s world view” and stresses the importance of what he calls “the *understanding*” in making sense of historical evidence.

The historian’s genuine problem is always to interpret things as they happened. But he cannot solve this problem on the ground of the theorems provided by all other sciences alone. There always remains at the bottom of each of his problems something which resists analysis at the hand of these teachings of other sciences. It is these individual and unique characteristics of each event which [...] the historian can understand [...] because he is himself a human being.⁵⁵

More recently, the historian John Lewis Gaddis has proposed that every historian approaches his subject with certain assumptions, based on personal experience, about “how things happen” in the world—assumptions about “the way the world is,”⁵⁶ the way the world works. “Sorting out the difference between how things happen and how things happened,” Gaddis writes, “involves more than just changing a verb tense. It’s an important part of what’s involved in achieving [a] closer fit between representation and reality.”⁵⁷

But if the historical enterprise can be difficult to distinguish from the fictional enterprise (particularly in light of the concept, introduced some four decades ago by Truman Capote, of the “non-fiction novel”), what does this imply about so-called “historical fiction”? Is there any reason a reader should place any more confidence in the work of an historian than in the work of an historical novelist? The answer is that everything depends on what historian we’re talking about, what novelist we’re talking about, and what kind of historical fiction we’re talking about.

54 Tosh, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

55 Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Third Revised Edition. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 49.

56 This phrase has long been associated with the American philosopher Nelson Goodman (1906-1998). Anyone interested in Ayn Rand’s concept of sense of life would profit from reading Goodman’s classic 1960 essay “The Way the World Is,” reprinted recently in Peter J. McCormick, ed. *Starmaking: Realism, Anti-Realism, and Irrealism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 3-10.

57 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 106-107.

III

The Historical Fiction of Kenneth Roberts

Consider, in brief summary, the careers of three prominent historical novelists of the last century: Kenneth Roberts (1885-1957), John Dos Passos (1896-1970), and Gore Vidal (1925-). Kenneth Roberts grew up in his hometown of Kennebunkport, Maine, matriculated at Cornell from 1904 to 1908, then traveled to Massachusetts, where he spent a decade as a reporter and columnist for the *Boston Post*. He served in U.S. Army intelligence during World War I, then joined the staff of the *Saturday Evening Post* as a roving correspondent. He spent the next decade moving constantly, from London to Paris to Berlin to Prague to Washington, D.C. and back again, in search of material for his articles for America's most popular general magazine.

Finally, in 1928, at the age of forty-three, Roberts turned his back on journalism and embarked on a project he had long considered and dreamed about, but had never before attempted: the writing of a carefully researched historical novel. "I've had a theory for a great many years," he wrote in a 1935 letter, "that a writer can write more effectively about his own people than he can about people that aren't in his blood.... My people have always lived in Maine."⁵⁸ Four years earlier, in a letter to fellow writer Julian Street, he had confessed that he began writing historical novels to help insure preservation of "the speech, the events, the customs and the appearance" of his beloved native state.⁵⁹ Accordingly, then, he called this first historical novel of his *Arundel* (*Arundel* having been the original name of Kennebunkport—the name was changed in 1821). *Arundel* was published in 1930. It was followed, in short order, by *The Lively Lady* (1931), *Rabble in Arms* (1933), and *Captain Caution* (1934).

None of these volumes became bestsellers, or anything close to it. But Roberts persisted in his chosen course, and his next novel, *Northwest Passage* (1937), not only made the bestseller lists but was also sold to Hollywood and became the basis for the February 1940 motion picture of the

58 Quoted by Linda M. Orlando in her short essay "Kenneth Roberts: Maine Writer, Historian," 22 April 2003. Online at http://www.suiterior.com/article.cfm/maine_people/99310

59 Quoted by Jack Bales, Roberts's biographer and most notable critic, in "At the Nadir of Discouragement: The Story of Dartmouth's Kenneth Roberts Collection," April 1990. Online at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/Library_Bulletin/Apr1990/LB-A90-Bales.html

same name, starring Spencer Tracy, Robert Young, and Walter Brennan. So successful was this cinematic debut at the box office that by October, another, much less ambitious film had been quickly thrown together to cash in on the new Roberts boom—an adaptation of *Captain Caution*, starring Victor Mature. Roberts's next two novels, *Oliver Wiswell* (1940) and *Lydia Bailey* (1946), were bestsellers as well, and the latter title was adapted by Hollywood for release in the late spring of 1952. All this activity by Roberts on the bestseller lists and the silver screen during the late '30s, the '40s, and the early '50s stimulated new interest in—and new sales for—his earlier novels as well. In 1957 he was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize for “his historical novels which have long contributed to the creation of greater interest in our early American history.”

In a nutshell, then, Roberts's novels attracted relatively little attention for several years, only to become the cat's meow and the toast of the town by the end of the first decade in which he occupied himself writing them. To what may we attribute this sudden and very definite turnaround in public opinion?

Well, consider the nature of most of Roberts's novels. His first two novels of the American Revolution, *Arundel* and *Rabble in Arms*, focus on Benedict Arnold—his unsuccessful expedition against Quebec in *Arundel*, his victories at Lake Champlain and Saratoga in *Rabble in Arms*. Roberts maintained to the end of his life that Arnold had been “the most brilliant soldier of the Revolution.”⁶⁰ Moreover, in his third and final novel of the Revolution, *Oliver Wiswell*, Roberts describes the last year of the conflict through the eyes of his title character, a loyalist spy who joins Arnold when the most brilliant soldier switches sides. Linda Orlando may be overstating the case when she writes that Roberts “explained and defended the treason of General Benedict Arnold” and that Roberts considered Arnold “misunderstood,” and “not the villain history had depicted him to be.” But there can be little doubt that Roberts's novels were taken in just this way by many of his contemporaries.

Now, generations of Americans had been taught in school that the revolutionaries of 1776 were on the side of the angels, that the views of the loyalists were the merest rubbish, scarcely worth recounting, and that Benedict Arnold was a Traitor with a capital “T,” an utterly evil and despicable man, as close as you could come in American history to the Devil himself. Moreover, the England of the 1930s was no more likely to win any popularity contests held in the United States than was the England of George III. As Charles Callan Tansill reminds us, it was

60 Bales, *op.cit.*

only twenty years earlier, in the first years of World War I, long before the United States had become involved in that conflict, that the British government had commenced seizing “American vessels under such specious pretexts that even our Anglophile President lost his patience and called for some action that would protect American rights.”⁶¹ And now, two decades later, the British were up to the same tricks all over again.

Up to the middle of November 1939 the British had detained thirty-three American ships for examination, and had removed cargoes, wholly or in part, from seven of them. After November 4, under the terms of the Neutrality Act, American ships were forbidden to carry cargoes in combat areas in European waters. It was expected in Washington that British detentions would sharply decrease after this date. But the British Government, with the same irritating unconcern for American feelings that it showed during the years 1914 to 1917, continued the practice of detention and even compelled American ships to proceed to control ports within the combat area which was closed to them by the express terms of the Neutrality Act.⁶²

Not that this was the full extent of the beef most Americans felt they had with the English in the 1930s. There was also the fact that, in the popular mind at least, the great war the English had helped persuade the United States to enter in 1917 had been a disastrous waste. As Thomas Fleming puts it,

Disillusion with the American experience in World War I permeated the nation. The soaring idealism with which Democrat Woodrow Wilson had led the country into that sanguinary conflict “to make the world safe for democracy” had ended in the vengeful Treaty of Versailles. Thanks in large part to that document, Europe’s statesmen had created a world in which democracy soon became ridiculed and dictatorships of the left and right ran rampant. Worse, America’s democratic allies, England and France, had welshed on repaying billions of dollars loaned to them to defeat Germany.⁶³

As late as the late summer of 1941, only a few months before the Pearl Harbor attack, Fleming points out, “polls revealed 68 percent of the people preferred to stay out [of the war in Europe], *even if that meant a German victory over England and Russia.*”⁶⁴

61 Charles Callan Tansill, *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), p. 7.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 568.

63 Thomas Fleming, *The New Dealers' War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the War Within World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 4.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 89 [emphasis added]

The confidence of those Americans who held that position was fast eroding by the summer of '41, however. It had been eroding, with gathering speed, ever since 1937, when the intellectual leadership of the "liberal" wing of the Democratic Party—which dominated American politics from 1932 to 1952—began revising its view of U.S. foreign policy. As James J. Martin reminds us,

[m]any American liberals were warm supporters of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy which led us into war in 1917. Disillusioned with the outcome of this first American crusade in foreign lands, they repudiated their previous position on the First World War, bitterly opposed the Treaty of Versailles, seriously criticized the motives and conduct of our wartime Allies, adopted and supported revisionist historical writing, and became the main bulwark and shocktroops of the peace movement and disarmament for nearly two decades between the two World Wars.⁶⁵

As Martin sees it, liberals in the '30s displayed "[a] benign, friendly and optimistic attitude towards the 'collective security' foreign policy of Soviet Russia" but were "shocked and repelled by what was presented in the public prints and personal reports as the nature of the Fascist systems in Italy and Germany." Gradually, but with rapidly accelerating speed, they allowed themselves to be persuaded by articles, including editorials and reviews, "on the subject of United States foreign policy and our relations with the rest of the world by [...] authors, journalists, essayists, professors and related specialists in the realm of the social studies, in a [...] group of highly influential periodicals circulated nationally in the United States."⁶⁶

These "authors, journalists, essayists, professors and related specialists" were, of course, the people Friedrich Hayek labeled "the intellectuals" in his famous essay "The Intellectuals and Socialism." Intellectuals, Hayek declared, were "professional secondhand dealers in ideas," or, differently formulated, "professional interpreters of ideas." The intellectual, he wrote, is

neither [...] the original thinker nor [...] the scholar or expert in a particular field of thought. The typical intellectual need be neither: he need not possess special knowledge of anything in particular, nor need he even be particularly intelligent, to perform his role as inter-

65 James J. Martin, *American Liberalism and World Politics: Liberalism's Press and Spokesmen on the Road Back to War Between Mukden and Pearl Harbor* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1964), p. xi.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. xii, xv.

mediary in the spreading of ideas. What qualifies him for his job is the wide range of subjects on which he can readily talk and write, and a position or habits through which he becomes acquainted with new ideas sooner than those to whom he addresses himself.⁶⁷

It is the intellectual class, Hayek contends, that exercises the greatest influence in “shaping public opinion.”⁶⁸

There is little that the ordinary man of today learns about events or ideas except through the medium of this class; and outside our special fields of work we are in this respect almost all ordinary men, dependent for our information and instruction on those who make it their job to keep abreast of opinion. It is the intellectuals in this sense who decide what views and opinions are to reach us, which facts are important enough to be told to us, and in what form and from what angle they are to be presented. Whether we shall ever learn of the results of the work of the expert and the original thinker depends mainly on their decision.⁶⁹

The intellectuals’ “selection from the multitude of new ideas presenting themselves at every moment creates the characteristic climate of opinion, the dominant *Weltanschauung* of a period.” And it can do so more quickly than one might expect, for “once the more active part of the intellectuals has been converted to a set of beliefs, the process by which these become generally accepted is almost automatic and irresistible.”⁷⁰

Thus it was that the intellectual leadership of the “liberal” wing of the Democratic Party in the 1930s brought off the considerable feat of turning its members around 180 degrees—from doves to hawks, as we say today—in a mere handful of years. But to accomplish this, the intellectuals had to first accomplish a number of lesser public relations triumphs. One of these was rehabilitating England’s tarnished reputation. Martin notes that before 1937, “cordiality toward England was not a feature of editorial policy” in the “liberal” press. On the other hand, he reasons, “[t]he sudden growth of deep affection for England at war after a lengthy period of often grievous criticism could hardly have been possible if a basic, underlying favorable pre-disposition had not been lying dormant during this spell of coolness.”⁷¹

67 Friedrich A. Hayek, “The Intellectuals and Socialism” in *The Intellectuals: A Controversial Portrait*, ed. George B. de Huszar (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960), pp. 371, 380, 372.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 371.

69 *Ibid.*, pp. 372-373.

70 *Ibid.*, pp. 376, 374

71 Martin, *op.cit.*, pp. 1032-1033.

Perhaps it was this same “underlying favorable pre-disposition” that led the reading public to suddenly embrace the pro-British novels of Kenneth Roberts, after years of ignoring them. Or perhaps, as the efforts of the “liberal” intelligentsia to reshape public opinion on the crisis in Europe began to succeed, the pro-British stance of Roberts’s novels began to seem more palatable—even appealing. Or did a confused American public, still only partially weaned from its suspicion of England and its distrust of what George Washington had called “foreign entanglements,” reach out for Kenneth Roberts’s novels out of a felt need to find a way to justify the friendlier attitude toward the English that already seemed well on its way to becoming the new conventional wisdom?

We don’t know. But we do know this: history is, as Cicero insisted, “the witness of the times.” Note the plural. History is the witness both of the times it describes and of the times in which it is written, for each generation revises history to accord more closely with its own particular values and preoccupations. Roberts’s meticulously researched depictions of the American Revolution tell us much about the times they depict, but they have much to reveal as well about the times in which they were published and first found a mass audience. For the writers who gain the widest fame and favor with the public in any given period are the writers who do the best job of reflecting back to that public whatever are its own major preoccupations—the ideas, the dreams, the notions of what things in life are the most and least important, most and least worthy of a person’s attention and concern.

IV

The Historical Fiction of John Dos Passos

For that matter, the writers who fail to gain wide fame and favor with the public in any given period have much to tell us about that period, too. John Dos Passos, eleven years younger than Kenneth Roberts, is a case in point. While Roberts was settling into the newspaper trade in Boston, Dos Passos, born in Chicago, was growing up in a series of European hotels and in boarding schools in England, New England, and Washington, D.C. While Roberts was signing up with U.S. Army

intelligence, Dos Passos, a newly minted Harvard graduate, was taking “lessons in driving, automobile maintenance, and medical techniques as preparation for volunteer service” with the Red Cross as an ambulance driver in World War I France.⁷² In the ’20s, while Roberts was traveling through Europe and the United States filing articles for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Dos Passos was publishing “essays, poems, and reviews in *The Dial*, *The Nation*, and *The Freeman*” and writing *Three Soldiers*—along with E. E. Cummings’s *The Enormous Room* and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, one of the best known antiwar novels to come out of the American experience of World War I.⁷³

For Dos Passos was one of those “disillusioned” liberals of whom James J. Martin wrote—those liberals who “repudiated” their previously “warm support” of Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy and became “bulwarks” of the peace and disarmament movements. “When Woodrow Wilson led the country into the European war,” Dos Passos wrote nearly forty years later, “however little we approved this reversal of American tradition, most of us just out of college were crazy to see what war was like. We experienced to the full the intoxication of the great conflagration [...]”⁷⁴ But when Dos Passos reached the front, he did not find exactly what he had expected. During 1917, in the first year of his ambulance corps service in France, he wrote to a friend that “[t]he war is utter damn nonsense—a vast cancer fed by lies and self seeking malignity on the part of those who don’t do the fighting...none of the poor devils whose mangled dirty bodies I take to the hospital in my ambulance really give a damn about any of the aims of this ridiculous affair.” A year later, he was “[a]ccused of disloyalty by Red Cross authorities,” not only because of his “insubordinate attitude” but also because of his “criticism of ‘stupidities’ of modern war expressed in an intercepted letter.”⁷⁵ War, Dos Passos found, was a “[w]aste of time, waste of money, waste of lives, waste of youth.” Those of his generation who had eagerly marched off to war “came home with the horrors.”⁷⁶

And this attitude toward the war found its way into Dos Passos’s fiction—not only *Three Soldiers* but also the *U.S.A.* trilogy, his major work of the 1930s: *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big*

72 See Daniel Aaron and Townsend Ludington, “Chronology,” in John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 1246.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 1247.

74 John Dos Passos, *The Theme Is Freedom* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1956), p. 1.

75 Aaron and Ludington, *op.cit.*, p. 1246.

76 Dos Passos, *Theme*, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-2.

Money (1936). *U.S.A.* was a fictionalized history of the war years and the years of disillusion that followed. It was composed in a new, patchwork style which Dos Passos had developed, placing tightly written fictional scenes in quick juxtaposition with collages of newspaper headlines (both real and invented), popular songs, radio commercials, and short prose poems on real people (Woodrow Wilson, Randolph Bourne, Sacco and Vanzetti) and events of the years during which the story unfolded. Dos Passos thought of “novels as history, history presented more accurately and more deeply than conventional history,” Linda W. Wagner explains. As he saw it, “a few great novels,” the ones he sought to emulate, “drew much of their force from their mixture of history with fictional narrative and character.” In such novels as *War and Peace* and *Vanity Fair*, Dos Passos argued, “the story is the skeleton on which some slice of history is brought back to life.” Or, as Wagner puts it, in novels of the sort Dos Passos himself wrote, “characters and their adventures exist not because they are of interest in themselves but because they illustrate the ways in which society has developed.”⁷⁷

World War I soured Dos Passos on war for good. His newfound pacifism and distrust of centralized authority found expression, not just in *Three Soldiers* and *U.S.A.* but in everything he wrote thereafter. In 1950, looking back on Dos Passos’s career up to that point, Granville Hicks wrote that “[n]othing is deeper in the man than his fear of power.” Unless, of course, it was his hatred and fear of war. “As for war,” Hicks wrote, “Dos Passos hated it in and for itself and because it inevitably resulted in the piling of power upon power.” So it was that, as Wagner notes, “[m]aterials used in 1919 [...] and in *Mr. Wilson’s War*,” the nonfiction work which Dos Passos published in 1962, “are frequently similar and might also have appeared in [...] *Three Soldiers*.”⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, in light of these views, Dos Passos was prominent among the liberals who counseled against U.S. involvement in World War II. Martin reports that in the summer of 1937 he was advising his fellow liberals “to avoid the involvement talk by fellow travelers, stay home, and concern themselves with domestic reform.”⁷⁹ Later that year he warned that “[l]ashing ourselves up into a partisan fever will only make us the prey of whatever propaganda the warmongers want to put over on us” and that “[f]ascism thrives on the war spirit. Fan-

77 Linda W. Wagner, *Dos Passos: Artist as American* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979), p. xx.

78 *Ibid.*, pp. xviii, xvix.

79 Martin, *op.cit.*, p. 503.

ning the war spirit is preparing the ground for destruction of our own rights and liberties.”⁸⁰

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor late in 1941, Dos Passos abandoned his effort to talk Americans out of going to war, as did nearly all of his liberal colleagues. But he could never bring himself to fully accept the war, either, for, as he himself put it many years later, “For better or for worse the uselessness of war has been basic in my political thinking all my life.”

District of Columbia, Dos Passos’s second trilogy of novels on contemporary American history, applied the *U.S.A.* technique to the 1930s and early ’40s, depicting the Great Depression, the rise of the American Communist Party, the Spanish Civil War, the New Deal, and World War II. Of the three volumes—*Adventures of a Young Man* (1939), *Number One* (1943), and *The Grand Design* (1949)—it is the final one that most succinctly conveys Dos Passos’s by now familiar take on war:

At home we organized bloodbanks and civilian defense and imitated the rest of the world by setting up concentration camps (only we called them relocation centers) and stuffing into them

American citizens of Japanese ancestry (Pearl Harbor the date that will live in infamy) without benefit of habeas corpus [...].

The President of the United States

talked the sincere democrat and so did the members of Congress. In the Administration there were devout believers in civil liberty. ‘Now we’re busy fighting a war; we’ll deploy all four freedoms later on,’ they said.

[...]

War is a time of Caesars.

[...]

And the American People were supposed to say thank you for the century of the Common Man turned over for relocation behind barbed wire so help him God.

We learned. There were things we learned to do

but we have not yet learned, in spite of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence and the great debates at Richmond and Philadelphia

how to put power over the lives of men into the hands of one man

and to make him use it wisely.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 939.

⁸¹ John Dos Passos, *The Grand Design* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), pp. 416–418.

Dos Passos spent 1941-1946 as a correspondent for *Harper's* and *Life* magazines, filing stories from cities and towns all over America, and from Europe and the Far East as well. "A tour of the beaten-up cities of Europe six months after victory is a mighty sobering experience for anyone," he wrote in the January 7, 1946 issue of *Life*.

Europeans, friend and foe alike, look you accusingly in the face and tell you how bitterly they are disappointed in you as an American. They cite the evolution of the word "liberation." Before the Normandy landings it meant to be freed from the tyranny of the Nazis. Now it stands in the minds of the civilians for one thing, looting.

"Never has American prestige in Europe been lower," Dos Passos reported. "People never tire of telling you of the ignorance and rowdy-ism of American troops, of our misunderstanding of European conditions. They say that the theft and sale of Army supplies by our troops is the basis of their black market."

Worst of all, perhaps, was the destruction the war had brought.

The ruin this war has left in Europe can hardly be exaggerated. I can remember the years after the last war. Then, as soon as you got away from the military, all the little strands and pulleys that form the fabric of a society were still knitted together. Farmers took their crops to market. Money was a valid medium of exchange. Now the entire fabric of a million little routines has broken down. No one can think beyond food for today. Money is worthless. Cigarettes are used as a kind of lunatic travesty on a currency. [...] "Well, the Germans are to blame. Let them pay for it. It's their fault," you say. The trouble is that starving the Germans and throwing them out of their homes is only producing more areas of famine and collapse.

Had fighting the war been worth it? Dos Passos wasn't at all sure. "All we have brought to Europe so far," he wrote, "is confusion backed up by a drumhead regime of military courts. We have swept away Hitlerism, but a great many Europeans feel that the cure has been worse than the disease."⁸²

In another 1946 dispatch, after a visit to Berlin, Dos Passos wrote:

The ruin of the city was so immense it took on the grandeur of a natural phenomenon like the Garden of the Gods or the Painted Desert . . . you drove in past the shattered university and the heaps that had been Friedrichstrasse and the empty spaces where a little of the shell of the Adlon still stood. The Brandenburg Gate was oddly

⁸² See John Dos Passos, "Americans Are Losing the Victory in Europe." *Life* 7 January 1946. Online at <http://www.kultursmog.com/Life-Page01.htm>

intact. Through it you looked out over the waste, punctuated by a few stumps of trees and a few statues, that used to be the Tiergarten. At the further end of the Tiergarten were crowds of furtive people with bundles under their arms scattered in groups over a wide area that looked like an American city dump.⁸³

There *were* worse things than physical destruction, however, Dos Passos found: “Once war has broken the fabric of human society, a chain reaction seems to set in, which keeps on after the fighting has stopped, tearing down the decencies and the inhibitions that hold civilization together.”⁸⁴

For half a century John Dos Passos railed against war and the strong, centralized State in novels, essays, polemics, and works of history. Little wonder, then, that his historical fiction sold poorly during the same period in which Kenneth Roberts’s novels were topping the bestseller lists and wowing Hollywood producers. Little wonder that in 1942 and 1943, while Roberts was happily building a spacious new home in Kennebunkport with the profits from his historical novels, Dos Passos, “despite literary fame,” found that his “finances continue[d] to be shaky.”⁸⁵ Little wonder that his entire career was marked by what Linda W. Wagner bluntly calls a “lack of any real financial success.”⁸⁶ He was swimming against the tide of popular opinion. He was not telling readers what they wanted to hear.

Gore Vidal, like Dos Passos, was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and was educated in expensive private schools in and around Washington, D.C. Unlike Dos Passos, whose father was a wealthy corporate lawyer and world traveler, Vidal grew up around politics. His father was a high ranking official in the Franklin Roosevelt administration, the director of the Bureau of Air Commerce, the agency known today as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). His maternal grandfather, who lived in the Vidal family home, was the venerable, sightless U.S. Senator Thomas Pryor Gore (D-Oklahoma), and Vidal recalls the daily ritual of being

sent with car and driver to pick up my grandfather at the Capitol and bring him home. In those casual days [ca. 1935-1937], there were few guards at the Capitol—and, again, [“Washington was a small town where”] everyone knew everyone else. I would wander on to the floor

83 Dos Passos, *Theme*, op.cit., p. 232.

84 *Ibid.*, pp. 233-234.

85 Aaron and Ludington, op.cit., p. 1255.

86 Wagner, op.cit., p. xxi.

of the Senate, sit on my grandfather's desk if he wasn't ready to go, experiment with the snuff that was ritually allotted each senator; then I would lead him off the floor.⁸⁷

In his thirties, after years as an author of modern mainstream novels, a scenarist for motion pictures and television, and an intellectual journalist, Vidal decided to try his hand at historical fiction. (Dos Passos had also been in his thirties when he sat down to begin *The 42nd Parallel*.) Given his early political background, Vidal might well have been expected to focus his new historical fiction on the politics and diplomacy of the times he sought to depict. And that is precisely what he did. His first historical novel was *Julian* (1964), a portrait of the Roman emperor who attempted to reverse his nation's official adoption of Christianity as the state religion, in hopes of reverting to the long-discarded paganism of earlier days. His second historical novel, *Washington, D.C.* (1967), takes place in this nation's capital between 1937 and 1952 and depicts the major events of that time—the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Second World War, the death of FDR, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the McCarthy Era—as they might have been seen by politicians and journalists plying their crafts on the shores of the Potomac during those years. This second historical novel has its admirers, but it seems fair to say that its principal importance lies not in its text but rather in what it led to. For it was the first step in the creation of Vidal's American Chronicle, a series of historical novels whose phenomenal success makes it worthwhile to contemplate at some length. It may fairly be said, I believe, that no success on this scale has been enjoyed by any historical novelist writing with serious artistic and scholarly intent about America since . . . well, since the days of Kenneth Roberts.

Consider: The first of Vidal's American Chronicle novels (*Burr*) was the fifth biggest fiction bestseller of 1973⁸⁸; it was so successful that three years later the Book of the Month Club acquired its sequel, *1876*, "sight unseen" and before the manuscript had even been completed; and the club's gamble paid off handsomely, for, upon publication, "*1876* quickly went to the top of the bestseller list."⁸⁹ In 1984, when the third volume in the series, *Lincoln*, was published, Vidal found that he was

87 Gore Vidal, "At Home in Washington, D.C." in *At Home: Essays, 1982-1988* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 6.

88 See "Making the Bestseller List," Online at http://www.lib.virginia.edu/small/exhibits/rave_reviews/list_making.html

89 Fred Kaplan, *Gore Vidal: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 686-687.

faced with another “huge bestseller,” another “critical success, reinforced by [...] immense sales.”⁹⁰ Four years after its first publication, *Lincoln* was adapted as a made-for-TV movie. In the '90s all three of these novels (the first three in the series) were confirmed as modern classics by being reissued in Modern Library editions. The later volumes in the series enjoyed less spectacular sales than the first three, but all the novels have sold briskly, and the entire American Chronicle enterprise has been a profitable one, both for Vidal and for his publishers and producers.

But I get ahead of my story. Let us pause, then, and examine more closely this American Chronicle series of Vidal's.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 738, 740.

TWO

THE HISTORICAL FICTION OF GORE VIDAL: THE “AMERICAN CHRONICLE” NOVELS

I

Burr and Lincoln

WASHINGTON, D.C. (1967) was followed six years later by *Burr* (1973), which covers the period 1775 to 1840 as it was lived and understood by the notorious Aaron Burr. Another three years went by, and Vidal published *1876* (1976), portraying the events leading up to and immediately following the hotly contested presidential election campaign of the U.S. Centennial year, which pitted Democrat Samuel Tilden of New York against Republican Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio.

It was nearly a decade before Vidal would add another volume to the American Chronicle series. That next volume was the celebrated *Lincoln* (1984), which follows events in Washington from Abraham Lincoln's surreptitious arrival in the city to be inaugurated for his first term in the White House to his assassination scarcely four years later. *Lincoln* was followed, in quick succession, by *Empire* (1987), which focuses on the years 1898 to 1906, and *Hollywood* (1990), which focuses on U.S. involvement in World War I and its immediate aftermath—the years 1917 to 1923. Then, after a decade of work unrelated to the American Chronicle, Vidal published the final volume of the series, *The Golden Age* (2000). Oddly, this volume does not depict a previously undramatized period of years. As Harry Kloman puts it, “Rather than simply taking place after *Washington, D.C.*—which covers the years 1937 to 1952—*The Golden Age* loops back to re-cover the same years, 1939 to 1954.” It also features almost all of the same characters. And, of course, the major historical events in the two novels are the same. As Kloman writes, *The Golden Age* “is the narrative *Washington*

D.C. might have been had Vidal written the books chronologically.” Thus “You might think of the new book as an alternative version of the older one.” Kloman points out that “[w]hen Vidal published *Washington, D.C.* in 1967, he had no plan to tell America’s story from the Revolutionary War through the present.” Accordingly, he counsels, “now that Vidal has completed the series, one might just consider it to be six books in length, with *Washington, D.C.* standing off to the side, in part an accidental beginning to a Chronicle that it no longer fits, and in part an alternative conclusion that’s more literary and introspective than historical.”⁹¹

In the following pages, I take Kloman’s advice: I use the term “American Chronicle” to refer to the following set of six novels, arranged and discussed in correct historical sequence: *Burr*, *Lincoln, 1876*, *Empire*, *Hollywood*, and *The Golden Age*.

Burr is narrated by a fictional character, Charles Schermerhorn (“Charlie”) Schuyler, a young clerk employed in the New York law office of Aaron Burr. Charlie moonlights as a journalist, writing fairly regularly for the poet William Cullen Bryant, in the latter’s capacity as editor and publisher of the New York *Evening Post*. It is 1833, Andrew Jackson has just begun his second term in the White House, and the political cognoscenti are already debating who should be his successor. Jackson himself favors his vice president, Martin Van Buren, as does Bryant. But Bryant’s assistant on the *Post*, William Leggett, is not convinced of Van Buren’s suitability. He has heard rumors that Van Buren is one of Burr’s many illegitimate children, and he believes that a book or pamphlet proving the truth of that rumor to the public’s satisfaction would have the estimable effect of ruining Van Buren’s chances for the presidency. He hires Charlie to research and write such a book or pamphlet.

In the course of his research, Charlie will discover that he himself is one of Colonel Burr’s illegitimate offspring. But in the beginning he thinks of the Colonel as merely his elderly boss (Burr is seventy-seven when the novel begins), who turns out to be more than willing to have his brain picked. He gives Charlie his journal of the Revolutionary War period to read. He dictates his further memoirs to Charlie in a series of meetings, some of them at the law offices where both of them work, some of them in Burr’s home. Burr’s narrative is alternated with Charlie’s own so that the reader is gradually filled in on the history

91 Harry Kloman, “Gore Vidal’s American Chronicles: 1967–2000.” Online at <http://www.pitt.edu/~kloman/vidalframe.html>

of the United States from the beginning of the Revolution to the last days of the second Jackson administration. This history is not, however, the conventional one which most of Vidal's readers have presumably had presented to them in school. As Donald E. Pease puts it, what Burr presents in these pages is "an alternate American narrative" in which the founding fathers look somewhat different from the way most readers are accustomed to seeing them. "Instead of finding them to be representative of American civic virtue and American democracy, for example, Burr explains Washington's belief in a strong central government as an effort to protect his vast landholdings in Mount Vernon, and Thomas Jefferson's espousal of states' rights simply as a political strategy to win votes."⁹²

Burr is appalled at what he considers to be Washington's "incompetence" as a military leader.⁹³ He notes that Washington "did not read books" and that though he "was always short of money, he lived grandly." He looks back on Washington as having been "defective in grammar and spelling, owing to a poor education" and as having been "most puritanical." He speaks derisively of our first President as having been "unable [...] to organize a sentence that contained a new thought."⁹⁴ He tells Charlie that when "in September 1777 the British out-manoeuvred Washington once again and occupied Philadelphia,"

the Philadelphians did not at all mind the presence of the British army in their city; in fact, many of them hoped that Washington would soon be caught and hanged, putting an end to those disruptions and discomforts which had been set in motion by the ambitions of a number of greedy and vain lawyers shrewdly able to use as cover for their private designs Jefferson's high-minded platitudes and cloudy political theorizings.⁹⁵

Jefferson makes out no better than Washington in Burr's eye view. "He was the most charming man I have ever known," Burr tells Charlie, "as well as the most deceitful." All in all, in Burr's view (as imagined by Vidal), Jefferson was a prize hypocrite. "Proclaiming the unalienable rights of man for everyone (excepting slaves, Indians, women, and those entirely without property)," Burr sneers, "Jefferson tried to seize the Floridas by force, dreamed of a conquest of Cuba, and after his ille-

92 Donald E. Pease, "America and the Vidal Chronicles" in *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 269.

93 Gore Vidal, *Burr* (New York: Random House, 1973), p.14.

94 *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 56, 58.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

gal purchase of Louisiana sent a military governor to rule New Orleans against the will of its inhabitants.”⁹⁶

Not only did Jefferson betray his supposed individualist ideals, he refused to fight for them when the time came—at least, as Aaron Burr sees it. “I do remember hearing someone comment,” he tells Charlie, “that since Mr. Jefferson had seen fit to pledge so eloquently our lives to the cause of independence, he might at least join us in the army.” But did he? No. Instead, while Washington’s army suffered at Valley Forge, Jefferson “spent a comfortable winter [...] at Monticello where, in perfect comfort and serenity, he was able amongst his books to gather his ever-so-fine wool.”⁹⁷ Later, when the British army closed in on Richmond,

Governor Jefferson fled to Monticello, leaving the state without an administration. At Monticello he dawdled, thought only of how to transport his books to safety. Not until the first British troops had started up the hill did he and his family again take to their heels. Later Patrick Henry’s faction in the Virginia Assembly demanded an investigation, but fortunately for Jefferson the proud Virginia burghesses did not want to be reminded of the general collapse of their state and so their hapless governor was able to avoid impeachment and censure. He did not, however, avoid ridicule; and that is worse than any formal censure.⁹⁸

Not only was Jefferson a coward and a fraud, according to Burr, he was also “a ruthless man” who “simply wanted to rise to the top. Odd how Jefferson is now thought of as a sort of genius, a Virginia Leonardo. It is true he did a great number of things, from playing the fiddle to building houses to inventing dumb-waiters, but the truth is that he never did any one thing particularly well—except of course the pursuit of power.”⁹⁹

The pursuit of personal power is, however, difficult to reconcile with the ideal of individual liberty proclaimed in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the Bill of Rights. On the other hand, according to Burr, Jefferson never really believed very fervently in such individual liberty. Consider freedom of speech and of the press, for example. Burr quotes Jefferson as having told him in late 1803 or early 1804, that

96 *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 160.

97 *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 87.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

"[i]n 1789, Madison sent me a copy of the proposed amendments to the Constitution, and I wrote him that I thought he should make it clear that although our citizens are allowed to speak or publish whatever they choose, they ought not to be permitted to present false facts which might affect injuriously the life, liberty, property or reputation of others or affect the national peace with regard to foreign nations. Just the other day I reminded Madison of that sad omission in our Constitution, and he agreed that today's *monstrous* press is a direct result of the careless way the First Amendment was written."

Still, as Burr relates it, Jefferson did not advocate federal action against members of the press who published "false facts." On the contrary. "As usual, Jefferson had a way around the difficulty [...]. 'Since the federal government has no constitutional power over the press, the states can then devise their own laws.'"¹⁰⁰

Perhaps worst of all (at least in the eyes of some), there was the matter of Jefferson's slave, Sally Hemings—or, as Burr refers to her, "Jefferson's concubine Sally, by whom he had at least five children." Sally was an illegitimate daughter of John Wayles, Jefferson's father-in-law, Burr tells Charlie, "which made her the half-sister of Jefferson's late wife. [...] Amusing to contemplate that in bedding his fine-looking slave, Jefferson was also sleeping with his sister-in-law! One would have enjoyed hearing him moralize on that subject."¹⁰¹

Nor are Washington and Jefferson the only Founding Fathers to rank low in Aaron Burr's estimate. There is also Alexander Hamilton, whom Burr had met and befriended during the Revolution—or so, at any rate, he tells Charlie. As the years passed, however, the two men not only grew apart but also came more and more regularly into conflict. In the end, Burr killed Hamilton in a duel. Burr does not explain to Charlie why he called Hamilton out, but an old friend of Burr's, Sam Swartwout, the customs collector of the port of New York, does the job for him. Hamilton, Swartwout tells Charlie, had accused Burr, a widower, of living in incest with his lovely, intelligent, and accomplished daughter.

The 1804 duel with Hamilton is perhaps the most famous event in Burr's life. The second most famous is probably his arrest and trial, four years later, on charges of treason. As Burr tells Charlie the latter story, it reminds him (unsurprisingly) of Jefferson's hypocrisy and lust for power. According to Burr, Jefferson tried to suspend *habeas corpus* so he could

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 196.

continue to hold two of Burr's alleged associates in a military prison and "beyond the reach of the Constitution." In his defense, Jefferson argued that "[o]n great occasions, every good officer must be ready to risk himself in going beyond the strict line of law, when the public preservation requires it." His political opponents, Jefferson acknowledged, "will try to make something of the infringement of liberty by the military arrest and deportation of citizens, but if it does not go beyond such offenders as Swartwout, Bollman, Burr, Blennerhassett, etc., they will be supported by the public approbation." Burr's summary of Jefferson's view is succinct and unsparing. "In other words," he tells Charlie, "if public opinion is not unduly aroused one may safely set aside the Constitution and illegally arrest one's enemies."¹⁰²

In the next novel in Vidal's series, *Lincoln*, another president employs the same tactics, and justifies his actions in a very similar way. It is now more than fifty years after Jefferson's abortive attempt to suspend *habeas corpus*. Abraham Lincoln is making war against the Southern states that seceded from the Union at the beginning of his first term in the White House. In his attempt to ensure that Maryland does not join those seceded states, he imposes martial law, orders the arrest of "anyone who takes up arms—or incites others to take up arms, against the Federal government," and orders further that those arrested be held "indefinitely without ever charging them with any offense." His justification is reminiscent of the one Burr attributes to Jefferson, who spoke of "the public preservation." "[T]he most ancient of all our human characteristics is survival," Lincoln tells his Secretary of State, William H. Seward. "In order that this Union survive, I have found it necessary to suspend the privilege of the writ of *habeas corpus*, but only in the military zone." As Lincoln sees it, he is merely exercising what he calls the "inherent powers" of the presidency when he takes actions of this kind. And, as he tells Seward, "An *inherent* power [...] is just as much a power as one that has been spelled out."¹⁰³

Lincoln is not narrated in the first person as *Burr* is. Rather it is narrated in the third person—not an "omniscient" third person, but one whose point of view hops around among a short list of important characters: Lincoln's secretary, John Hay; Secretary of State Seward; Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase; First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln; and David Herold, the pharmacist's clerk and Southern sympathizer who

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 351.

¹⁰³ Gore Vidal, *Lincoln* (New York: Random House, 1984), pp. 153, 152.

was later convicted of conspiring successfully with John Wilkes Booth and others to assassinate Lincoln early in his second term in office.

The Lincoln thus presented might well be expected to resemble the proverbial elephant as observed by several different blind men. But in fact Vidal's Lincoln is much more coherent than that, for his observers are not blind. They differ widely in their opinions and interpretations of what they see, but what they see is identifiably the same man. Harold Bloom looks at Vidal's Lincoln and sees "[a] minority President, elected with less than 40 percent of the total vote."

Though his election committed him only to barring the extension of slavery to the new states, and though he was a moderate Republican and not an Abolitionist, Lincoln was violently feared by most of the South. Vidal's opening irony, never stated but effectively implied, is that the South beheld the true Lincoln long before Lincoln's own cabinet [...] The South feared an American Cromwell, and in Vidal's vision, the South actually helped produce an American Bismarck.¹⁰⁴

Vidal's Lincoln, says Donald E. Pease, is "interested mostly in self-aggrandizement," though his interest in sex was sufficient in his younger years that he "contracted syphilis from a prostitute and communicated this disease to his wife and children."¹⁰⁵ To Fred Kaplan, Vidal's Lincoln is "a pragmatic and manipulative politician with one overriding vision: to save the Union and by saving it to transform it into a modern, industrialized, national state so powerfully and tightly coherent that nothing can tear it apart again."¹⁰⁶

This mania for "saving the Union" cannot be overestimated as a central factor in the motivations and behavior of Vidal's Lincoln. As Bloom notes, Vidal's Lincoln is "a respecter of neither the states, nor the Congress, nor the Court, nor the parties, nor even the Constitution itself."¹⁰⁷ Pease makes the same point when he writes that "Vidal's Lincoln is a political heretic who believes in none of the political instruments supportive of union (the Congress, the Courts, the Constitution) except insofar as they can supplement his will to absolute executive power."¹⁰⁸

104 Harold Bloom, "The Central Man: On Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*" in *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 223-224.

105 Pease, op.cit., pp. 272-273.

106 Kaplan, op.cit., p. 740.

107 Bloom, op.cit., p. 224.

108 Pease, op.cit., p. 272.

Vidal's Lincoln is also no Great Emancipator. Vidal's Lincoln, as Pease points out, "believes the emancipation of slaves entails their exportation to the West Indies or Liberia."¹⁰⁹ For, as Kaplan notes, though he is "[o]pposed to slavery, Lincoln does not believe slavery an issue worth fighting about."¹¹⁰ Vidal's Lincoln tells the assembled delegates of the Southern Peace Conference that met with him shortly after his election that "I will do what I can to give assurance and reassurance to the Southern states that we mean them no harm. It is true that I was elected to prevent the extension of slavery to the new territories of the Union. But what is now the status quo in the Southern states is beyond my power—or desire—ever to alter." "I have never been an abolitionist," he tells his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. To a delegation of black freemen that comes to meet him at the White House, Vidal's Lincoln declares that "your race is suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people. But even when you cease to be slaves you are still a long way from being placed on an equality with the white race." His secretary, John Hay, sitting in on the meeting, reflects that the president "was unshaken in his belief that the colored race was inferior to the white."

The fact that Lincoln had always found it difficult to accept any sort of natural equality between the races stemmed, Hay thought, from his own experience as a man born with no advantage of any kind, who had then gone to the top of the world. Lincoln had no great sympathy for those who felt that external circumstances had held them back.

Early in his second term, Vidal's Lincoln informs Congressman Elihu Washburne (R-Illinois) of his intention to "reimburse the slave-owners" for their freed slaves. This, he tells Washburne, "will [...] be a quick way of getting money into the South for reconstruction." In addition to the money he'll need for that plan, he adds, "we'll need money to colonize as many Negroes as we can in Central America." Washburne is somewhat astonished that the president still favors such a plan. "When you get hold of an idea," he says to Lincoln, "you don't ever let it go, do you?" Lincoln replies: "Not until I find a better one. Can you imagine what life in the South will be like if the Negroes stay?"¹¹¹

Vidal's Lincoln is firm in his belief that slave-owners should be compensated for their loss and that the freed slaves should be deported. He is also firm in his belief that both these issues are merely tangential

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 272.

¹¹⁰ Kaplan, op.cit., p. 740.

¹¹¹ Vidal, *Lincoln*, op.cit., pp. 38, 556, 356, 635.

to the war raging between the United States and the Confederate States. Late in 1861, when the rogue Union general John C. Frémont declares martial law in Missouri (a border state) and announces that he will "confiscate the property of all secessionists, including their slaves, who were to be freed," Vidal's Lincoln declares "with anguish, to Seward, 'This is a war for a great national idea, the Union, and now Frémont has tried to drag the Negro into it!'" As Vidal sees it, this understanding of the war was not only Lincoln's, but also that of other prominent Americans of the time. Early in 1863, for example, not long after the president has delivered his annual message to Congress, Vidal's John Hay finds himself in conversation with the lawyer, diplomat, and newspaperman Charles Eames (1812-1867), who assures him that "what the war is about" is "the principle that the Union cannot be dissolved, ever." Later that year, when Union forces under General George G. Meade finally won a decisive victory over Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Meade telegraphed the White House, according to Vidal's account, that he now looked "to the army for greater efforts to drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader." Vidal's Lincoln does not like Meade's choice of words. "Of course, Pennsylvania is our soil," he tells Hay. "But so is Virginia. So are the Carolinas. So is Texas. They are forever our soil. That is what the war is about and these damned fools cannot grasp it; or will not grasp it. The whole country is our soil. I cannot fathom such men."¹¹²

Fully in keeping with this understanding of what the war is all about is Lincoln's view of how reconstruction should be handled once the war is won. The Radical Republicans take the formation of the Confederate States of America at face value: "the states in rebellion were out of the Union and should be treated as an enemy nation's conquered provinces."

But Lincoln's line was unwavering. The Union was absolutely indivisible. No state could ever leave it; therefore no state *had* ever left it. Certain rebellious elements had seen fit to make war against the central government, but when those elements were put down all would be as it was and the Southern states would send representatives to Congress, exactly as they had done in the past.¹¹³

But, of course, after the war, nothing was as it was before the war. Not only had 600,000 Americans lost their lives in the conflict, but another 400,000 were wounded, many of whom were crippled for

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 240, 391-392, 447, 448.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 430-431.

life. Altogether, nearly 1,000,000 Americans were casualties of the war, out of a total population of a little more than 31,000,000. If three percent of the current U.S. population were to be killed or wounded in a war, we would be looking at nearly 9,000,000 casualties. There was also extensive property damage, particularly in the South—damage so extensive it would be many decades before anything resembling a full economic recovery could be said to have taken place there. Perhaps most important of all, in Vidal's version of the years 1861-1865, a series of precedents was laid down by the Lincoln administration which, in the years ahead, would justify the steady erosion of individual liberty in the United States.

For Vidal's Lincoln does not limit his assault on the Constitution to the suspension of *habeas corpus*. He tells Seward not long after his first inauguration, "Yesterday, at three in the afternoon, I ordered every U.S. marshal in the country to seize the original of every telegram that has been sent and a copy of every telegram that has been received in the last twelve months." Seward wonders aloud about "[t]he *legal* basis for this seizure," and Lincoln answers, "The *broader* powers inherent in the Constitution." Vidal's Lincoln censors the press, locking up editors who oppose his policies. Vidal's Baron Gerolt, the Prussian minister to Washington, tells Seward that his own boss, Otto von Bismarck, "very much admires the way that you arrest editors but he dares not do the same in Prussia because he says that, unlike you, he is devoted to freedom of speech." That Vidal's Lincoln is not in fact devoted to freedom of speech is made evident by his action against the former Ohio Congressman Clement Vallandigham, who "held that Lincoln's war measures were illegal and unConstitutional [sic] and so far worse than the defection of the Southern States." Vidal's Lincoln has Vallandigham arrested and forcibly exiled to the Confederacy. Vidal's Lincoln threatens to place New York City under martial law to suppress opposition to the nation's first military conscription law. Vidal's Seward reflects in 1864 that there is now "a single-minded dictator in the White House, a Lord Protector of the Union by whose will alone the war had been prosecuted" and that "Lincoln had been able to make himself absolute dictator without ever letting anyone suspect that he was anything more than a joking, timid backwoods lawyer." Charlie Schuyler, the narrator of *Burr*, reappears briefly in a couple of scenes in *Lincoln*, and, in the novel's closing pages, observes to John Hay that Bismarck "has now done the same thing to Germany that you tell us Mr. Lincoln did to our country."¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 126, 273, 389, 421, 437-438, 457-458, 459, 656.

II

1876, *Empire*, and *Hollywood*

1876, the third novel in Vidal's American Chronicle series, is once again narrated in the first person by Charlie Schuyler (now in his early sixties), who has returned to the United States after spending thirty years in Europe, first as a member of the diplomatic corps, then as the husband of an independently wealthy member of a noble family. His wife is now long dead, Charlie's money has run out, and his wealthy son-in-law's recent, unexpected departure from this world (followed by the discovery of his carefully concealed penury), has left him responsible once more for his accomplished daughter, Emma, whom he had thought well married and safely provided for. Charlie has continued to dabble in journalism over the years, has even published a book or two. So he and Emma come back to the United States in 1875 on a triple errand: Charlie will attempt to earn a sufficient amount from freelance writing for newspapers and magazines to support the two of them in decent style; Charlie will meanwhile do what he can to help New York Governor Samuel Tilden get himself elected president in the upcoming 1876 election (and to persuade Tilden to send Charlie right back to Paris as U.S. Ambassador to France); and Charlie will also see if he can find another, comparably well fixed husband for his daughter. In the course of covering both the presidential campaign and the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, and in the course of marketing his daughter to financially qualified suitors, Charlie meets and profiles numerous luminaries of the period—Tilden, Republican Congressman and presidential aspirant James G. Blaine, Republican Senator and presidential aspirant Roscoe Conkling, Chester Alan Arthur (the customs collector of the port of New York), President U. S. Grant, journalist Charles Nordhoff, and Mark Twain among them—but the emphasis here is not, as it was in *Burr* and *Lincoln*, on the sayings and doings of these actual historical figures. Nor does Vidal's vision of these famous people conflict with the conventional understanding of them in the way that his vision of Lincoln and the Founding Fathers does. He presents the Grant administration as riddled with corruption, but this is a commonplace. He portrays Tilden as the legitimate winner of the 1876 election, who was defrauded of his rightful presidency by the Republican Party and the U.S. Supreme Court—but this is another commonplace. The emphasis in *1876* is on

the imaginary characters, on Charlie and Emma and on the rich new husband they find for her, William Sanford.

In terms of historical chronology, Sanford made his first appearance in the *American Chronicle* in the pages of *Lincoln*, where he was seen as a wealthy young Union captain, an aide to General Irvin McDowell, who devoted his spare time to romancing Kate Chase, daughter of Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase. "I plan to leave the army the first of the year," Sanford tells Kate late in 1862. "We could go to France. There is a house there I've had my eye on since before the war. At St. Cloud, near Paris. We could have a wonderful life. I'd study music. You could be at court, if you wanted that."¹¹⁵

Kate doesn't take Sanford up on his offer. Instead she marries the equally wealthy, if somewhat drunken, senator from (formerly governor of) Rhode Island, William Sprague. Sanford moves on, then meets and marries another woman, who turns up in 1876 as the delightful Denise Sanford, another of the imaginary characters whose sayings and doings dominate the pages of this third novel in Vidal's series. Denise becomes pregnant, then dies in childbirth; the Sanfords' infant son Blaise is spared. Within weeks, Sanford has wooed and wed Emma. Within a year, she herself is dead in childbirth, leaving behind a daughter, Caroline de Traxler Sanford, the illegitimate great-granddaughter of Aaron Burr.

As the fourth novel in Vidal's series, *Empire*, opens, the year is 1898 and Caroline is twenty. She attends a luncheon party which also includes John Hay, Henry James, and Henry Adams. Hay and Adams are familiar to us from *Lincoln*, in which Hay functioned as one of Lincoln's two secretaries, and as an important point-of-view character, and in which Adams functioned as Hay's young friend, scion of the famous Adams family but determined to make it on his own as a journalist. Hay is about to be appointed Secretary of State by Republican President William McKinley, who has just led the nation to victory against Spain in the Spanish-American War. We learn that Caroline's father has just died and that she and her half-brother Blaise are quarrelling over the estate. In an effort to gain leverage over her brother, Caroline appropriates some valuable paintings from their family home, sells them, and uses the proceeds to buy a dying daily, the *Washington Tribune*, which she proceeds to transform into a journalistic success story. She does so, in no small part, by carefully following the lessons never spelled out but always implied by the successive triumphs of Blaise's employer, William Randolph Hearst. Thus, though Blaise works as Hearst's personal

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 347.

assistant, and though he lusts to own a paper in his own right, it is his half-sister who proves to be Hearst's more talented student.

Caroline runs the *Tribune* alone for seven years, during which time she becomes pregnant by a young, married Congressman, James Burden Day, and quickly marries an impecunious cousin to provide her daughter Emma with an official father and herself with an official mate, sparing Day a scandal that might ruin his career, settling her husband's many troublesome debts, and never revealing, either to her husband or to her daughter, the identity of Emma's actual father. After she finally collects her inheritance, Caroline brings Blaise into her newspaper operation as co-publisher. She decides to invest in real estate in Georgetown, despite the fact that it is "still mostly Negro," because "here and there, eighteenth-century townhouses were being restored by the canny white rich. Caroline had taken two row houses and knocked them into one."¹¹⁶

It is not long, however, before Caroline is living only part time in Georgetown. By 1917, as *Hollywood*, the fifth novel in Vidal's series, opens, she is adopting a new identity, as silent film actress Emma Traxler, and a second part-time home, this one in Los Angeles. Blaise, meanwhile, has also married and produced children, the younger of whom, Peter Sanford, will follow his father into journalism, except that he will eschew the world of newspapers for the world of magazines, devoting his career to a journal of analysis and opinion called *The American Idea*. In the epilogue of *The Golden Age*, the sixth and final volume of Vidal's American Chronicle, it is the turn of the 21st Century and the now elderly Peter Sanford is being interviewed, along with his friend Gore Vidal, at Vidal's home in Italy for a TV documentary. The producer-interviewer who is putting the documentary together is Aaron Burr ("A. B.") Decker, grandson of Caroline's daughter Emma and thus great-great-great-great-grandson of the original Aaron Burr, with whose story the series began.

The last three novels of the series focus more attention on the sayings and doings of the Sanford family, James Burden Day, and other imaginary figures, and comparatively less on the historical events and personages of the times in which they take place. The three are, in fact, all of a piece with respect to this issue. Fred Kaplan tells us that Vidal had originally planned for the first two of these three novels to be a single book:

¹¹⁶ Gore Vidal, *Hollywood: A Novel of America in the 1920s* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 18.

[T]hrough much of 1985-86 he had worked on *Manifest Destiny*, the tentative title of the next novel in his American history series. When the manuscript became too long, he used much of it under the title *Empire* [...], published in June 1987 [...]. The remainder became the core of *Empire's* successor, *Hollywood*, which was published in February 1990.¹¹⁷

Harry Kloman suggests that *Empire* is overly “concerned with frivolities, name dropping, and gossipy historical deconstruction,”¹¹⁸ and Andrew Sullivan faults *The Golden Age* in very similar terms:

The characters in the novel—writers, senators, proprietors of political magazines and their countless relatives—are all so well-heeled that their conversation [...] amounts to little more than chatter. [...] At times the book reads like one of those interminable *Vanity Fair* pieces about cocktail parties in the 1950s given by society hostesses no one but a complete snob would give a hoot about.¹¹⁹

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that all this frivolous chatter and gossipy name dropping is not entirely irrelevant to Vidal's purpose in the American Chronicle series. For a large part of that purpose is to make certain points about journalism—as a shaper of the historical record, as an influence on public opinion, and as a center of social power. Journalism is a prominent presence throughout the American Chronicle, as are individual journalists, both real ones like William Cullen Bryant, Henry Adams, and William Randolph Hearst and invented ones like Caroline, Blaise, and Peter Sanford. The sayings and doings of these journalists do have thematic significance, however frivolous they may seem at certain times and to certain readers. Indeed, it might be argued that their very frivolity and superficiality are meant to tell us something about journalists and journalism in the abstract.

Also, though the last three novels in the series do focus to a greater extent than the first three on the sayings and doings of imaginary journalists, they are by no means limited entirely to depictions of these journalists. The politicians who figured large between 1898 and 1954 are depicted also, and in ways that differ markedly from more conventional accounts of the period. Secretary of State John Hay, for example, minces no words in describing the frank racism and imperialism behind the

117 Kaplan, op.cit., p. 766.

118 Kloman, op.cit.

119 Andrew Sullivan, “The Greatest Generation (Revised).” *New York Times* 1 October 2000. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/10/01/reviews/001001.01sulliv.html>

foreign policy he recommends to President McKinley, when the latter seeks his guidance on the matter of the Philippines, newly "liberated" from Spain. "I have always thought," Vidal's Hay says,

"that it was the task of the Anglo-Saxon races, specifically England, now shrinking, and ourselves expanding, to civilize and to," Hay took a deep breath and played his best if most specious card, "*Christianize* the less developed races of the world. I know that England is counting on us to continue their historic role, and they believe, as I believe, that the two of us together can manage the world until Asia wakes up, long after we're gone, I pray, but with our help now, a different sort of Asia, a Christian Asia, civilized by us, and so a reflection of what was best in our race once history has seen fit to replace us."¹²⁰

Lest there be any misunderstanding, Vidal's Hay also assures the president that he has mercantilist as well as racist and imperialist reasons for believing the United States should hold onto the Philippines. "The European powers are getting ready to divide up China," he tells McKinley. "We'll lose valuable markets if they do, but if we are entrenched nearby, in the Philippines, we could keep the sea lanes open to China, keep the Germans and the Russians and the Japanese from upsetting the world's balance of power."¹²¹

Hay's views are shared fully by the bellicose governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt, who is destined to become McKinley's second vice president a scant two years later, and, after McKinley's assassination only a few months into his second term, the youngest man ever to have assumed the American presidency up to that time. "Have you read Admiral Mahan on sea-power?" Vidal's Roosevelt demands of Blaise Sanford during an interview. "Published nine years ago. An eye-opener. I reviewed it in the *Atlantic Monthly*. We are fast friends. Without sea-power, no British empire. Without sea-power, no American empire, though we don't use the word 'empire' because the tender-minded can't bear it."¹²² Then the governor really gets going.

Roosevelt was now marching rapidly in a circle at the center of the room. He had been seized by a speech. As he spoke, he used all the tricks that he would have used and [sic] had Blaise been ten thousand people at Madison Square Garden. Arms rose and fell; the head was thrown back as if it were an exclamation mark; right fist struck left hand to mark the end of one perfected argument, and the beginning

¹²⁰ Gore Vidal, *Empire* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 73.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

of the next. “The degeneracy of the Malay race is a fact. We start with that. We can do them only good. They can do themselves only harm. When the likes of Carnegie tells us that they are fighting for independence, I say any argument you make for the Filipino you could make for the Apache. Every word that could be said for Aguinaldo could be said for Sitting Bull. The Indians could not be civilized any more than the Filipinos can. They stand in the path of civilization.”¹²³

“I speak now only of savages,” Vidal’s Roosevelt insists.

“When Mr. Seward acquired Alaska, did we ask for the consent of the Eskimos? We did not. When the Indian tribes went into rebellion in Florida, did Andrew Johnson offer them a citizenship for which they were not prepared? No, he offered them simple justice. Which is what we shall mete out to our little brown brothers in the Philippines. Justice and civilization will be theirs if they but seize the opportunity. *We shall keep the islands!*”¹²⁴

Later, after he has become president and asked Hay to stay on as Secretary of State, Vidal’s Roosevelt defends the diplomatic and military chicanery by means of which he obtained the right of way through Panama to build a canal in that Central American country. “The point, John, is that we have done something useful for our country. Our fleets can go back and forth, quickly, between Atlantic and Pacific.” Hay is perplexed. “You see a future so filled with war?” he asks the president. And Vidal’s Roosevelt replies, “Yes, I do. [...] I also see our own mission, which is to lead where once England led, but on a world scale...”¹²⁵

Still later, when President Woodrow Wilson has led the United States into involvement in World War I, Vidal’s Roosevelt shows up at the White House to offer to lead a volunteer division in France. While there, he takes the opportunity to offer the president some advice on his conduct of the war. He points out to the president that “the German-language press [...] has been, from the beginning, disloyal to this country. I would, as a military necessity, shut all those papers down.” Wilson is taken somewhat aback. “Isn’t this—arbitrary?” he asks Roosevelt. “Surely, they are guaranteed the same freedoms—” But Roosevelt cuts him off. “This is war, Mr. President. Lincoln suspended *habeas corpus*, shut down newspapers, and we’ll have to do the same...” Nor is this all he recommends to the startled president. “Many would-be traitors—German sympathizers—pretend to be peace-lovers, to be—what’s their

123 Ibid., p. 129.

124 Ibid., p. 130.

125 Ibid., pp. 373-374.

phrase?—‘conscientious objectors.’ Well, I would treat them conscientiously! I would deny them the vote. If they are of military age and refuse to fight for their country, then they must forgo their citizenship.”¹²⁶

Vidal’s Wilson, for his part, a “professional historian, who preferred the British parliamentary system to the American executive system,” is not at all averse to the idea of helping the British with just about anything they might want to undertake. Once he decides to intervene in World War I to aid the British, he follows Roosevelt’s advice and harshly censors the press. But he finds to his sorrow that, even with his critics silenced, there is insufficient public support for his war. As a result, there are “too few volunteers.” He has a solution, though: “We must conscript the young men. Draft them. Find a new word for draft, if necessary, but no matter what the word, there is so little time to do so much in.” Accordingly, Vidal’s Wilson wastes no time in making sure that “[c]onscription was [...] swift and absolute and under another name. On June 5, ten million men between twenty-one and thirty had been registered under the National Defense Act for ‘selective service’ in the armed services, which sounded rather better than, say, cannon fodder in France.”¹²⁷

III

Hollywood and The Golden Age

Wilson’s successors in the White House, Warren G. Harding and Herbert Hoover, are both much more wary of foreign entanglements. (Vidal pays short shrift to Calvin Coolidge, who served between Harding and Hoover, perhaps because Coolidge merely carried out Harding’s foreign policies.) Blaise Sanford looks at Harding and muses that

[t]he fact that Harding’s career had been one of astonishing success could not be ascribed solely to brute luck or animal charm. Without luck and charm, Harding would probably not have had a political career. But he had had the luck and the charm and something else as well, hard to define because he was so insistently modest.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Vidal, *Hollywood*, op.cit., p. 70-71.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 33, 69, 82.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 376.

So modest is Vidal's Harding that he publicly gives all credit for his administration's triumph at the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference in 1921 to his Secretary of State, Charles Evans Hughes. In fact, as Vidal tells it, all Hughes had done was "read off the particulars of Harding's secret plan," under which "the United States was willing to scrap thirty capital ships" and "Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy were invited to rid themselves of close to two million tons of war-ships."¹²⁹

Harding had figured that if any word of his plan were to leak to the press, military expansionists everywhere would have time to rally public opinion against disarmament. Hence the thunderbolt, hurled by Hughes in the presence of the benign presidential author. It was Harding's theory that once world opinion was appealed to, there would be no way for the various governments to back down.

Harding's theory proved correct. His "gamble paid off. The world was enthralled, and in the course of a single morning Harding became the central figure on the world's stage, and the most beloved."¹³⁰

Herbert Hoover, who entered the White House as president six years after Harding's sudden death, attempted to continue his predecessor's peace-loving foreign policy, only to be brought up short by the machinations of his own Secretary of State, Henry L. Stimson. Stimson, according to Vidal's Hoover,

"wanted to make all Asia our responsibility. That means if the Japanese would not let go of Manchuria, we would go to war with them. When I realized what he was up to, I called a Cabinet meeting and read Henry the riot act. I agreed that although Japanese behavior on the mainland of Asia was deplorable, we were in no way threatened, economically or morally."¹³¹

Making war under such circumstances is repugnant to Vidal's Hoover. "I would never sacrifice any American life anywhere," he states forthrightly, "unless we ourselves were directly threatened." "People forget," Vidal's Hoover complains, "that when I was elected president we were occupying most of Central America and the Caribbean. I pulled the Marines out of Haiti, out of Nicaragua, and then when our war lovers insisted that we invade Cuba and Panama and Honduras, I said no."¹³²

After 1932, Hoover is helpless to prevent war so easily, for he has been voted out of office and replaced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 366.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 367.

¹³¹ Gore Vidal, *The Golden Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 166.

¹³² Ibid., pp.166-167.

distant cousin of the earlier, Republican Roosevelt, who had been so bellicose and eager for hostilities. The new, Democratic Roosevelt "goes on and on about how he hates war because he has seen war," Vidal's Hoover declares with evident contempt. "As usual, he lies. He toured a battlefield or two after Germany had surrendered. And that was that. He saw no war. Does he hate what he has never experienced? Who knows? But I had to feed the victims of that war and I don't want anything like that to happen ever again. But Stimson does. Roosevelt does. I find them unfathomable."¹³³

By the time Vidal's Hoover utters these remarks the two unfathomable creatures at whose motives he so marvels are busily working together, for Roosevelt names Stimson his Secretary of War just after winning an unprecedented third term in the White House in November 1940. And thereafter, Vidal's Stimson and Vidal's FDR conspire to turn American public opinion around 180 degrees so that it will favor the course they themselves fervently advocate: U.S. intervention in the European war that began in 1939. Another of their co-conspirators is Harry Hopkins, the former social worker turned presidential confidante and adviser. "A principal architect of the New Deal, as the President's largely unsuccessful plan to end the Depression was called, Hopkins was the man in the shadows, forever whispering into the President's ear, as they experimented with programs and secretly manipulated friends and enemies."¹³⁴ And, as luck would have it, Hopkins also becomes a close friend of Caroline Sanford, who returns to Washington in 1939, at the beginning of *The Golden Age*. She is sixty and has spent the last decade in Europe, but is now bent on playing an active part once again in the daily publication of the *Washington Tribune*. Her friendship with Hopkins makes her privy to much interesting information.

"There is no way," Hopkins tells Caroline,

"that we—this administration anyway—will let England go down. We can always handle the isolationists here at home [...] [w]ith some protective camouflage for Churchill, for England. The fact is they haven't been a great power since 1914. But we all kept pretending they were until Hitler came along. Up till then the whole thing has been a sort of bluff. That's why we keep going on about a special relationship between the English-speaking nations, [...] [d]isguising the fact that we are the world empire now and they are simply a client state. A bunch of offshore islands. Certainly they are close to us in many ways,

¹³³ Ibid., p. 167.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

but they aren't necessary to us. To be blunt, we can survive—even thrive—without them, which is the wicked wisdom of the intelligent isolationists who are not just for America First, as they like to say in their speeches, but for *Amerika über Alles*.”¹³⁵

The question is how the president is going to involve the United States in the European war, coming to the aid of the British, when most Americans clearly oppose such an intervention. Former U.S. Senator Thomas Pryor Gore of Oklahoma, the blind politician turned out of office in 1936 by his constituents (perhaps for his outspoken criticism of the popular, if “largely unsuccessful,” New Deal), remains in Washington, where he has spent so much of his career, practicing law, talking politics with his numerous friends in and around the District, and relying on his grandson, Eugene Luther Vidal, Jr. (who will later become famous as the novelist, playwright, and essayist Gore Vidal), as an assistant and guide around the Capitol. In a conversation with the fictitious Senator James Burden Day, Vidal's Gore declares unequivocally that “the President has a plan, even some sort of timetable,” and that he is “provoking Japan into attacking us so he can live up to his campaign promise that, if elected, no sons of yours will ever fight in a foreign war—unless, of course, we are attacked.” In that event, if the attacker were Japan, not only would “the nation [...] be willing to enter the war,” but the United States would also be involved in the European conflict, “because Germany and Italy would have to honor their military treaty with Japan.”¹³⁶

“It's a very clever game.” Gore's one glass eye had strayed northward, while the blind eye was half shut. “Eighty percent of our people don't want us to go back to Europe for a second world war and nothing will ever persuade them, no matter how many of our ships the Germans sink. So we at least learned that lesson from last time. But to get the Japanese to strike first is true genius—wicked genius.”¹³⁷

Hopkins instructs Caroline on the wisdom of this plan. “[I]t is wisest for the President to let them make the first move. We think they'll attack Manila, and if by some miracle they should manage to blow up that horse's ass MacArthur, our cup will truly runneth over.” Even if they don't blow up MacArthur, however, “there's no going to war unless all your people are united behind you. Well, they are nowhere near united even though we keep losing ship after ship to the Nazis and no one blinks an eye. So we must take one great blow and then...”

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 173.

Hopkins pauses and Caroline prompts him by asking, "Then what?" "Then we go for it," Hopkins replies. "All of it. And get it."

"What is *it*?" Caroline demands, frustrated.

"The world," Hopkins tells her. "What else is there for us to have?"¹³⁸

Vidal's Roosevelt succeeds in provoking the Japanese into an attack on Pearl Harbor. He succeeds too in concealing his foreknowledge of this event from the naval command in Hawaii, thereby insuring that the "one great blow" his nation must take is a great one indeed—great enough, devastating enough, to bring about the complete turnaround in public opinion that is necessary for the president to take the nation into a foreign war without committing political suicide in the process. However, FDR does not live to see the end of the war he leads his nation into. That pleasure falls to his successor, the unassuming Missouri haberdasher Harry S. Truman. And Truman minces no words in making it clear that he favors precisely the sort of U.S.-dominated world envisioned by Roosevelt and Hopkins. When Blaise Sanford's son Peter covers one of Truman's early speeches on foreign policy for his magazine *The American Idea*, he finds that

[t]he President not only briskly assumed for the United States global primacy but made it clear that from this moment forward the United States could and would interfere in the political arrangements of any nation on earth because "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by outside pressure."¹³⁹

On the other hand, this is not to say that everything in President Truman's foreign policy would have met with the approval of either Roosevelt or Hopkins. On the contrary. As Hopkins puts it to Caroline,

"Henry Wallace says Harry will agree with you before you've actually said what you mean. Then he'll go around telling everyone he gave you hell. Now it looks like he wants to give Stalin hell. That's bad news. The Boss was always willing to treat Stalin in a normal way. As the head of the other great world power. That's why Stalin trusted him, to the extent Russians ever trust anybody. Then Harry goes off to Potsdam and starts to renege on every agreement we made at Yalta. All because he's got the atomic bomb and they don't. So we're going to have a very expensive arms race and trouble everywhere."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 307.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 262.

In summary, then, Gore Vidal's American Chronicle novels tell a tale of American history that would seem passing strange to anyone whose understanding of the subject is confined to what has long been conventionally taught in American public schools and colleges. In Vidal's American history, the Founding Fathers are not graven saints, but fallible mortals driven as often by vanity, greed, and lust (whether for power or for the flesh of attractive slave girls) as by any belief in the nobility of their cause, and more often bent on benefiting themselves and the members of their social class than on benefiting Americans in general. In Vidal's American history, Abraham Lincoln preserved the Union at the cost of destroying everything about it that had made it worth preserving—the protections supposedly afforded by the Constitution to the inalienable individual rights of American citizens. In Vidal's American history, a cabal of racist imperialists had seized control of the federal government within scarcely more than a hundred years of the Constitution's ratification, and sent its young men on a rampage of international meddling and mass murder that culminated in the total destruction of two Japanese cities. In Vidal's American history, it was the United States, not the Soviet Union, which launched and then prolonged the Cold War.

THREE

THE STORY OF AMERICAN REVISIONISM

I

The Birth of American Revisionism and the Rise of Harry Elmer Barnes

THE question is, is Vidal's version of American history the truth? Is it merely a fictional creation by a writer who has long devoted part of his professional career to political polemics—a fictional creation designed to justify the criticisms of U.S. policy, especially U.S. foreign policy, so frequently contained in those polemics? Or could one, if one chose to look, find published, credentialed historians whose work lends credibility to Vidal's vision? In a word, does Vidal's vision of American history rest on a solid foundation in historical scholarship? Or doesn't it?

The short answer to this question is that, yes, Vidal's vision of American history *does* rest on a solid foundation in historical scholarship. But there is also a long answer to the question, and it runs as follows: the historical scholarship that verifies Vidal's account of American history is scattered throughout the historical record of the last century and a half, but most of it is the product of one or more of the three closely interrelated "revisionist" movements that emerged in American historiography during those years. These three movements are the "New History," whose leading practitioners later came to be called "the Progressive historians"; the rebellion of the "New Left Historians" that began creating consternation within the historical profession during the 1960s and '70s; and the closely related revisionist movement established in the 1960s by a new group of libertarian historians—a movement which only now, nearly half a century later, is at last gaining the adherents and generating the excitement that have long eluded it.

Before describing these three “revisionist” movements in more detail, it would perhaps be advisable to define the term *revisionism* as it applies to the study of history. “Revisionism,” according to Joseph R. Stromberg, “refers to any efforts to revise a faulty existing historical record or interpretation.”¹⁴¹ “The readjustment of historical writing to historical facts” is the succinct definition offered in 1953 by one of revisionism’s most notorious practitioners, Harry Elmer Barnes.¹⁴² Thirteen years later, he offered a slightly longer and more thoughtful definition: “the effort to revise the historical record in the light of a more complete collection of historical facts, a more calm political atmosphere, and a more objective attitude.”¹⁴³ Even in his slightly longer and more thoughtful formulation, however, it is noteworthy that Barnes places great emphasis on the facts of the case. We need to revise the historical record when we have new facts.

Yet, as William Appleman Williams argued in 1973, “it is only rarely that the belated discovery of new documents revolutionizes some part of history.” Accordingly, for Williams, “[t]he revisionist is one who sees basic facts in a different way and as interconnected in new relationships.”¹⁴⁴ In 1967, Warren I. Cohen had seen the issue similarly, and had written, in the Preface to his book *The American Revisionists* that “the revisionist revises an existing *interpretation* of an event in history.” On the other hand, Cohen had wondered aloud, later on in the selfsame sentence, whether the designation *revisionist* was really of any value to the student, “who realizes that every generation of historians tends to give new interpretations to the past.”¹⁴⁵ Richard Hofstadter, a year later, echoed this theme in his book *The Progressive Historians*, writing of “that perennial battle we wage with our elders.” As Hofstadter saw it, “If we are to have any new thoughts, if we are to have an intellectual identity of our own,

¹⁴¹ Joseph R. Stromberg, “Harry Elmer Barnes (1889-1968): Progressive and Revisionist.” 7 February 2000. Online at <http://www.antiwar.com/stromberg/5020700.html>

¹⁴² Harry Elmer Barnes, “Revisionism and the Historical Blackout” in *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: A Critical Examination of the Foreign Policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Its Aftermath*, ed. Harry Elmer Barnes (Caldwell, ID: Caxton, 1953), p. 7.

¹⁴³ Harry Elmer Barnes, “Revisionism: A Key to Peace” in *Revisionism: A Key to Peace and Other Essays*, ed. James J. Martin (San Francisco: Cato Institute, 1980), p. 1.

¹⁴⁴ William Appleman Williams, “Confessions of an Intransigent Revisionist” in *A William Appleman Williams Reader: Selections from his Major Historical Writings*, ed. Henry W. Berger (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992), p. 338. [emphasis in original]

¹⁴⁵ Warren I. Cohen, *The American Revisionists: The Lessons of Intervention in World War I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. vii. [emphasis added]

we must make the effort to distinguish ourselves from those who preceded us, and perhaps pre-eminently from those to whom we once had the greatest indebtedness.”¹⁴⁶

Perhaps this is the reason Harry Elmer Barnes was able to report, when he sat down in the last decade of his life to write “Revisionism: A Key to Peace,” that “revisionism dates from the beginnings of historical writing” and that “the first true historian” in Ancient Greece (Hecataeus of Miletus) “is known chiefly as a revisionist of traditional Greek tales about Hellenic origins.” Barnes also noted that

[r]evisionism has been most frequently and effectively applied to correcting the historical record relative to wars because truth is always the first war casualty, the emotional disturbances and distortions in historical writing are greatest in wartime, and both the need and the material for correcting historical myths are most evident and profuse in connection with wars.

According to Barnes, writing in 1966, “[r]evisionism was applied to the American Revolution many years ago,” and has been applied to every other war in which the U.S. government had been involved since.¹⁴⁷

Barnes, as has been seen, placed great emphasis on the importance of newly discovered facts as a justification for the revisionist’s work. On occasion, however, he too stressed the importance of re-interpreting long-known facts. “By the close of the nineteenth century,” he wrote in 1937 in his *History of Historical Writing*,

the student of history was in a condition not unlike that in which the physicist, chemist, or biologist would find himself if supplied with a vast number of notebooks containing carefully set down records of countless experiments and observations, but without any real attempt to interpret the significance of this mass of material or to derive from it scientific laws of general applicability.¹⁴⁸

Such interpretation was necessary, Barnes believed, because without it history could never be *useful*. “The great majority of historical works down to the present time,” he wrote in 1926,

have been filled with a mass of meaningless details with respect to the origins, succession, and changes of dynasties, or have dealt almost exclusively with battles, diplomatic intrigues, and personal anecdotes and episodes which have little or no significance in explaining how

¹⁴⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Knopf, 1969), p. xiv.

¹⁴⁷ Barnes, “Revisionism: A Key to Peace,” op.cit., pp. 1-2.

¹⁴⁸ Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, op.cit., p. 355.

our present institutions and culture came about, in indicating their excellence and defects, or in aiding us to plan a better and more effective future.¹⁴⁹

As an example of what he meant, Barnes turned to the history of his own nation. “The vast majority of the writing on American history,” he wrote, “has been concerned with its political and legal phases.” And this, he argued, had been a mistake. For

[u]ntil one understands that, however important Washington, Hamilton, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Winfield Scott, Abraham Lincoln, U. S. Grant, James G. Blaine, Elihu Root, or Theodore Roosevelt may have been in American history, they have done less to shape its chief tendencies than such men as Franklin, Eli Whitney, Fulton, Morse, McCormick, Kelley, Field, Bell, J. J. Hill, Edison, Goodyear and Henry Ford, there will be little hope of any serious approach to a vital grasp of the nature of the development of American society.¹⁵⁰

Barnes’s list of the true shapers of American society implies a certain interest in the economy and in the influence of technology on economic progress. And this interest seems only fitting when we recall that Barnes had done his graduate work in history “at the prewar Columbia of Robinson and Beard.”¹⁵¹

The “Robinson” to whom Peter Novick refers here is James Harvey Robinson (1863–1936), who taught at Columbia University from 1895 to 1919 and during those years founded, with Charles Austin Beard (1874–1948), what came to be known as the New History. Robinson was adamant that history should be of real utility to the living. “Our books,” he wrote, “are like very bad memories which insist upon recalling facts that have no assignable relation to our needs, and this is the reason why the practical value of history has so long been obscured.”¹⁵² To remedy this situation, Robinson proposed that historians make more extensive use of the social sciences, particularly economics, sociology, and psychology, in their efforts to understand the past. Beard illustrated this approach to history in his scandalously successful 1913 book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, in which he defended the thesis that

149 Harry Elmer Barnes, *History and Social Intelligence* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1972 [1926]), p. 271.

150 *Ibid.*, pp. 294, 293.

151 Peter Novick, *op.cit.*, p. 178.

152 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

the Framers had pursued their task less under the spell of the high ideals of 1776 than with their eyes trained on the main chance. Encouraging commerce and manufactures, protecting private property, establishing financial instruments essential for economic development—these were the issues that preoccupied those participating in the secret deliberations in Philadelphia—issues in which they themselves had a large personal stake.¹⁵³

Barnes had a background in sociology as well as economics. Born in 1889 “on a farm near Auburn, in the Finger Lake district of central New York State,” he “entered Syracuse University in the fall of 1909,” equipped “with the aim of preparing himself to be a high-school history teacher.”

When he graduated from Syracuse in 1913, he achieved all of the academic honors available for a history major: graduation *summa cum laude* at the top of his class, not only in Liberal Arts but in the University as a whole, first honors in history, and the annual Historical Essay Prize for his essay on Alexander Hamilton. After graduation he remained at Syracuse for two years as an instructor in sociology and economics.

Sociology and economics were, of course, disciplines that could introduce “new facts” into the historical record and thereby create a need for revisionism. In 1915, Barnes applied for admission to graduate study at Columbia. William Harrison Mace, the chairman of the history department at Syracuse, wrote to the Columbia Graduate Faculty that “Harry Elmer Barnes is probably the ablest student and most tireless worker the Department of History has ever graduated.”¹⁵⁴

In 1918, after three years immersion in the New History of Robinson and Beard (an outlook that his earlier interest in economics and sociology suggests came naturally to him), Barnes submitted his dissertation and was awarded his Ph.D. He was thus a member of what Peter Novick calls “the second-generation New Historians,” but he was destined to become, along with Beard, one of the two best known members of the movement. Preserved Smith of the Cornell University history department called Barnes’s *History of Western Civilization* (2 vols., 1935) “incontestably the masterpiece of the New History.”¹⁵⁵ As late as 1968,

153 Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities & Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 13.

154 Marguerite J. Fisher, “Harry Elmer Barnes: An Overall Preview” in *Harry Elmer Barnes, Learned Crusader: The New History in Action*, ed. Arthur Goddard (Colorado Springs, CO: Ralph Myles, 1968), pp. 1, 3, 4.

155 See Harry Elmer Barnes, ed. *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, op.cit., p. 2.

the year of Barnes's death, when a group of his former students, former colleagues, and fellow scholars contributed to a festschrift in his honor, the resulting volume was entitled *Harry Elmer Barnes, Learned Crusader: The New History in Action*.

Barnes "spent 1919-1920 as one of the original staff of the New School for Social Research," and spent a few years thereafter at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, first as an associate professor of European history, then as Professor of the History of Thought and Culture. Later, "[i]n 1923, Barnes left Clark to go to Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts as Professor of Historical Sociology. In addition to his regular position at Smith, he taught at Amherst for two years at the request of Dwight Morrow, who asked him to teach an introductory social science course known as 'Social and Economic Institutions.'" ¹⁵⁶

Meanwhile, he was writing voluminously on a freelance basis for both the scholarly and the popular press—for the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *Political Science Quarterly*, and the *American Historical Review*; for *The Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *American Mercury*. And sometime in 1921, he found the subject for which he would ultimately become most famous: the origins and significance of World War I. During that war, as a graduate student in history at Columbia and a budding part-time journalist and polemicist, he had been loud in his support of U.S. involvement in the conflict. As William L. Neumann notes,

Like many young men of his time he was a partisan of Woodrow Wilson. Like many of his older Columbia colleagues, notably [...] Charles A. Beard, he favored American entry into the European war before April of 1917. For his hometown New York newspaper, the *Port Byron Chronicle*, he wrote a long pro-intervention article in the winter of 1916-1917 which he later recalled as being "as ferocious in content, policy, and language as anything contributed by any sane person at the time." He also contributed to the pamphleteering work of the National Security League, the National Board for Historical Service, the American Defence Society, and several other propaganda agencies favorable to American entry into the European War. ¹⁵⁷

Then, in 1920 and 1921, Barnes read a series of articles in the *American Historical Review* by Sidney B. Fay of Smith College entitled "New Light on the Origins of the World War." Only a short time before, as Warren I. Cohen describes it,

¹⁵⁶ Fisher, op.cit., p. 15

¹⁵⁷ William L. Neumann, "Harry Elmer Barnes as World War I Revisionist" in *Harry Elmer Barnes, Learned Crusader*, op.cit., p. 262.

the opening of the Russian archives was followed by the opening of the archives of the defeated Central Powers. Numerous historians sat down to years of laborious research. The publicists and historians of lesser patience took a quick look and began writing. Almost all concluded what every intelligent American had known all along: that the Germans had not been one hundred per cent "evil," nor France and her allies one hundred per cent "good." But the "revisionist" interpretation often went further, to the extent of shifting primary responsibility for the origins of the war from the Central to the Allied Powers—and, ultimately, condemning American intervention.¹⁵⁸

Fay was one of the less patient historians; he had taken a quick look and had begun writing. Barnes took a somewhat slower look at the new evidence, but within three years he was not only a convert to Fay's revisionism but also its chief apologist in the popular press. An article under Barnes's byline on "Assessing the Blame for the World War" appeared in the May 1924 issue of *Current History*. It was followed a year later by a series of twelve shorter articles on the same subject in the *Christian Century*. The last of these *Christian Century* pieces had no sooner appeared (in the issue for December 17, 1925) than Barnes was busily at work revising and expanding the series for publication as a book: "[B]y June of 1926, the first edition of *The Genesis of the World War* was in the hands of reviewers, seven hundred and fifty pages long and selling for four dollars." Two years later, in 1928, Barnes "collected many of the controversial reviews of the first edition of the *Genesis*, his own rejoinders, some of his earlier articles, and an *American Mercury* article by C. Hartley Grattan" into a second book on World War I, *In Quest of Truth and Justice*.¹⁵⁹

If Barnes took a slower and closer look than Sidney Fay at the new evidence about the war that became available after the Armistice, Charles Beard, Barnes's old professor at Columbia, took an even longer time than Barnes did to change his view of the Wilson administration's "war to end war." But change it he did, in the end. By 1930 Beard had become firmly convinced "that U.S. entry into the war had been a mistake and that Wilson's peddling of the elixir of internationalism had been tantamount to fraud." He had, moreover, become convinced that U.S. wartime policies had been

self-serving, reflecting an eagerness to cash in on Europe's misfortune. A phony neutrality permitted a massive trade in arms with the Allies, propped up by American loans. The result at home was large

¹⁵⁸ Cohen, op.cit., p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ Neumann, op.cit., pp. 266, 268-269, 270, 272, 279.

profits for bankers and arms merchants and a general economic boom, sustainable only so long as the slaughter on the western front continued. By 1917 those policies culminated in intervention at the behest of Wall Street tycoons who would face ruin if Great Britain and France lost the war.

Now Beard enthusiastically joined his former student in attempting to sell World War I revisionism to the American public. As Andrew Bacevich notes, “Beard could wield his pen as ‘either shillelagh or stiletto’ and was equally adept at writing for academics, policy professionals or the general public.” And now that his mind was made up, he held nothing back. “Throughout the 1930s Beard devoted his formidable talents to averting” a recurrence of the disaster he now believed had taken place in 1917 and 1918. “In a torrent of books, pamphlets, and articles, he warned against being dragged into problems that were Asia’s or Europe’s, but not America’s. He labored furiously to alert his fellow citizens to the folly—and the danger—of reviving Woodrow Wilson’s project.”¹⁶⁰

II

Charles A. Beard and William Appleman Williams: From Progressivism to the New Left

Beard was a fearsome talent to be deployed on behalf of the revisionist cause. A native of Indiana, Beard had studied at DePauw University, Oxford University, and Columbia. He had taught at Columbia for thirteen years, then resigned to become “an independent scholar and commentator on events of the day.”

Over the course of his career, Beard published forty-two volumes of history and political science and coauthored another thirty-five. His masterful overview of U.S. history, *The Rise of American Civilization*, written with his wife, Mary R. Beard, became a bestseller and Book-of-the-Month Club selection. His histories alone sold 11.3 million copies during his lifetime. Beard’s articles and reviews—numbering in the hundreds—appeared in virtually all the leading scholarly and general-circulation journals of his day.

¹⁶⁰ Bacevich, op.cit., pp. 14-15, 11, 16.

Altogether, “[t]hrough the first half of the twentieth century, Charles A. Beard [...] was by common agreement the most influential historian in America.”¹⁶¹

With such intellectual firepower as Beard could muster, combined with that of his precocious and fabulously productive former student Barnes, anyone would expect that their case for World War I revisionism would have resoundingly carried the day. And, indeed, according to some accounts, it did. James J. Martin writes, for example, that the revisionist campaign “during the two decades prior to the outbreak of the Second World War” was “a success by almost any standard.” For “in the main, the field was carried by Revisionism, its position being adopted generally throughout the country by the majority of the nation’s most influential journalists and publicists. A very large part of the academic world as well accepted its general conclusions of divided war responsibility.” Moreover, “the stubborn unwillingness shown by an immense majority of Americans to become totally immersed in the [following] war until the Japanese attack on Hawaii on December 7, 1941, was due in large part to popularized revisionist lessons, disseminated between 1924 and 1937.”¹⁶² Similarly, Cohen refers to the revisionists’ battle for the minds and hearts of the American people during the interwar years as “[t]he battle won in the 1920’s and 1930’s by men like Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Beard, C. Hartley Grattan, Walter Millis, and Charles Tansill.”¹⁶³

Barnes himself was never so certain that the battle had been won. “At the outset,” he wrote,

American revisionist writing was somewhat precarious. Professor Fay was not in peril, personally, for he wrote in a scholarly journal which the public missed or ignored. But when I began to deal with the subject in media read by at least the upper intellectual level of the “men on the street,” it was a different matter. I recall giving a lecture in Trenton, New Jersey, in the early days of revisionism and being threatened bodily by fanatics who were present.

“Gradually,” Barnes acknowledged, “the temper of the country changed, but at first it was caused more by resentment against our former allies than by the impact of revisionist writings.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁶² James J. Martin, “History and Social Intelligence” in *Harry Elmer Barnes, Learned Crusader*, op.cit., pp. 241, 246.

¹⁶³ Cohen, op.cit., p. ix.

¹⁶⁴ Barnes, “Revisionism: A Key to Peace,” op.cit., pp. 10, 11.

Like Beard, Barnes put much energy during the 1930s into an attempt to persuade the American public of the dangerous folly (as he saw it) of becoming involved in yet another world war. When, late in the '20s, Barnes was given an opportunity to place this message before a much larger audience than he could ever command from the front of a college classroom or the pages of an intellectual weekly, he jumped at it. As Marguerite Fisher tells the story, "In 1929, during a sabbatical leave of absence" from his job at Smith, "Barnes went to New York to experiment for a year as an editorial writer, columnist, and book reviewer with the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain [...] then a powerful and liberal newspaper chain." The experiment was deemed a success, by both Barnes and his new employer, and was continued for another four years. In 1934, "he left the general organization of Scripps-Howard" and "was then taken on as a columnist, editorial writer and book reviewer for the *World-Telegram*, the New York City Scripps-Howard newspaper and the most important one in the chain. [...] Barnes finally left the *World Telegram* in May, 1940," determined to do as Beard had done and carve out a career for himself as a freelance intellectual—writing books, contributing to magazines and newspapers, and taking the occasional appointment as a visiting lecturer at such colleges or universities as might be interested in his services.¹⁶⁵

"His departure" from the *World-Telegram*, according to Fisher, "was hastened by the controversy aroused by his anti-interventionist editorials, columns, and book reviews."¹⁶⁶ It was perhaps inevitable, then, that he would next turn his revisionist attention to the very Second World War that he had tried so valiantly but failed so miserably to keep the United States out of. After all, that was what his old professor, Charles Beard, had done. As Bacevich puts it, Beard

closed out his career by denouncing as fraudulent the text most crucial to sustaining the myth of the reluctant superpower: the orthodox account of U.S. entry into World War II. In two scathing volumes—*American Foreign Policy in the Making* (1946) and *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941* (1948)—Beard accused Franklin Roosevelt of outright deception in his conduct of foreign affairs.

For, according to Beard, "even as he was promising to keep the country out of the war, Roosevelt was conniving to maneuver the United States into it."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Fisher, op.cit., pp. 17, 21.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁶⁷ Bacevich, op.cit., p. 12.

Barnes agreed entirely with Beard's analysis. And "[j]ust as in March, 1922, Barnes had demanded that the current interpretations of the causes of World War I be revised, so now, at the end of 1947, he made a similar demand with regard to World War II, only to find that the difficulties in the way of getting any truth published about the responsibility for World War II were all but insuperable." Still, by 1953 Barnes was able to find a publisher for his most ambitious revisionist project on the second great war. This was a nearly seven-hundred-page collection of essays by diverse hands, "dedicated to the late Charles Austin Beard who had suggested its title, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*. The specific content of the book was then illuminated by its subtitle, *A Critical Examination of the Foreign Policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Its Aftermath*."¹⁶⁸

Barnes continued to work out the details of his revisionist account of World War II for the rest of his life. But he knew by 1953, even in the hour of his greatest triumph (successfully getting *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* into print), that his cause was a lost one. He wrote, from that time on, in the interest of recording the truth, as he saw it, as an end in itself. He held out no hope for the sort of victory in the court of public opinion that his earlier World War I revisionism had enjoyed. "However much we may recoil from the prospect," he wrote in 1953 in the opening chapter of *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*,

there seems a strong probability that we are now entering the twilight of historical science. [...] History has been an intellectual casualty in both World Wars, and there is much doubt that it can be rehabilitated during the second half of the century. Indeed, there is every prospect that it will become more and more an instrument and adjunct of official propaganda—a supine instrument of our "Ministry of Truth."¹⁶⁹

Little did Barnes realize—little *could* he have realized—that all was not lost. For only a year before, the seed of an entirely new revisionist movement had been planted by a much younger but comparably prolific and polemical historian named William Appleman Williams, a movement that would shortly enjoy the kind of currency and influence which Barnes's own early works had enjoyed back in the 1920s and '30s. Williams (1921-1990) grew up in a small town in Iowa, won an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland,

¹⁶⁸ Henry M. Adams, "World War II Revisionist" in *Harry Elmer Barnes, Learned Crusader*, op.cit., pp. 295, 303.

¹⁶⁹ Harry Elmer Barnes, "Revisionism and the Historical Blackout," op.cit., p. 58.

and served aboard a U.S. Navy ship during the last year of the great war that was to bring Harry Elmer Barnes so much sorrow. "In 1947," Andrew J. Bacevich notes, "Williams left the Navy to study history at the University of Wisconsin, an institution famous, among other things, for its 'notorious loyalty' to the teachings of Charles Beard."¹⁷⁰ Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, from whom Bacevich drew the phrase "notorious loyalty" in the passage just quoted, go even farther in their 1995 biography of Williams, paraphrasing an unnamed "graduate alumnus" as saying that in those days "[a]ll a Wisconsin history student had to do for preliminary examinations [...] was to read Beard carefully."¹⁷¹ Peter Novick writes of the University of Wisconsin history department that it "was dedicated to the defense of Beard's reputation, and, with some qualifications, of his teachings."¹⁷² At Madison "Williams earned a doctorate in U.S. diplomatic history. His first book, *American-Russian Relations, 1781-1947*, published in 1952, implicitly questioned orthodox views of the Cold War's origins, much as Beard had questioned the conventional wisdom about American entry into World War II."¹⁷³

But Williams's questioning of the conventional wisdom would not remain implicit for long. By 1959, when the first edition of his most influential book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, appeared, he was clearly articulating, with considerable polemical vigor, the views that would characterize the rest of his long career. American foreign policy in the 20th Century, according to Williams, had been based on the Open Door Policy first enunciated by John Hay, secretary to President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State to Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. The problem, Williams argued, was that the Open Door Policy had evolved "from a utopian idea into an ideology," and the gist of that ideology was "the firm conviction, even dogmatic belief, that America's *domestic* well-being depends upon [...] sustained, ever-increasing overseas economic expansion."¹⁷⁴ This expansion could only be assured if the United States could be assured that the doors of all nations would be open to her goods, her culture, her social and political ideals, even her military. In Williams's view,

170 Bacevich, op.cit., p. 23.

171 Paul M. Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 37.

172 Novick, op.cit., p. 346.

173 Bacevich, op.cit., p. 23.

174 William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Dell, 1972 [1959]), pp. 206, 15.

"[o]f all the twentieth-century American presidents, only Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the dangers inherent in such an approach."¹⁷⁵ But Roosevelt's successor in the White House, Harry S. Truman, "was [...] an enthusiastic and militant advocate of America's supremacy in the world. He seemed, indeed, to react, think, and act as an almost classic personification of the entire Open Door Policy."¹⁷⁶ Unsurprisingly, Truman "and his advisors pursued ends that made the Cold War inevitable."¹⁷⁷

"After a series of short teaching appointments elsewhere," Bacevich writes, "Williams returned to Wisconsin in 1957 and quickly established himself in the front rank of American historians." Over the next eleven years he also "became the founding father and abiding inspiration of the 'Wisconsin School' of revisionist history that examined the underside of U.S. foreign policy and found there an American variant of imperialism."¹⁷⁸ This Wisconsin School of revisionist history also came to be known by another name, because so many of its leading figures were perceived as members of the New Left. As Novick puts it,

The new, left-oriented historians who became visible within the profession during the 1960s came to be capitalized, reified, and often tacitly homogenized as "New Left historians." This was a largely empty and misleading designation, lumping together individuals of the most diverse orientation, and often, innocently or maliciously, associating them with the most extreme wing of the student movement. [...] In fact, although there were some dissident historians who had ties to the student and youth insurgency which was labeled "New Left," at least as many either had no connection with the movement, or viewed it with a jaundiced eye.¹⁷⁹

One of those who might well be counted as viewing the New Left movement "with a jaundiced eye," in fact, was Williams himself. As Joseph R. Stromberg writes, "Even in the turbulent 'sixties,'" Williams "was critical of New Left excesses. He would have hated the present university climate of political correctness."¹⁸⁰ This assertion is echoed by

175 Robert James Maddox, *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 15.

176 Williams, *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, op.cit., p. 239.

177 Maddox, op.cit., p. 16.

178 Bacevich, op.cit., p. 24.

179 Novick, op.cit., p. 418.

180 Joseph R. Stromberg, "William Appleman Williams: Premier New Left Revisionist." 16 November 1999. Online at <http://www.antiwar.com/stromberg/s111699.html>

Henry W. Berger in his “Introduction” to *A William Appleman Williams Reader*. Berger writes:

Late in the 1960s, in the midst of frustrated opposition to the Vietnam War and increased domestic upheavals, Williams became disenchanted with many in the New Left, protesting a number of their actions which he believed contradicted and damaged efforts to change American society and the nature of United States relations with the world. He especially deplored “random nonsocial violence” as self-defeating and was disturbed when members of the New Left “tried to *impose* [their] consciousness on the rest of society through what [they] considered ‘vanguard’ actions in a crisis situation.”¹⁸¹

According to Bacevich, Williams’s disenchantment with the New Left began even earlier. “Though an avowed man of the left,” Bacevich writes, “by the mid-1960s Williams found himself increasingly out of sympathy with the political views of the Vietnam-era student radicals, among whom he had achieved the status of icon. He considered the antics of the counterculture to be childish and self-indulgent. He found the sexual revolution to be repugnant.”¹⁸²

Nonetheless, for better or for worse, the revisionist historians of the 1960s and ’70s who were followers of William Appleman Williams have come to be called the New Left Historians. And there can be no doubt that it was Williams to whom they looked as the creator and leader of their movement. Several of the most prominent among them—Walter LaFeber, Gabriel Kolko, Ronald Radosh—did their graduate work in history under Williams at Wisconsin. Others, like Gar Alperovitz, earned their undergraduate degrees in history at Wisconsin during Williams’s time there. As Robert James Maddox has written,

[b]y far the most influential American revisionist interpreter of the origins of the Cold War has been William Appleman Williams. [...] It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that much of the existing revisionist, or “New Left,” literature on the subject amounts to little more than extended footnotes on interpretations Williams first put forward.¹⁸³

181 Henry W. Berger, “Introduction” in *A William Appleman Williams Reader*, op.cit., p. 28-29.

182 Bacevich, op.cit., p. 24.

183 Maddox, op.cit., p. 13.

III

**Harry Elmer Barnes and James J. Martin:
From Progressivism to Libertarianism**

Williams, as has been seen, was a follower of Charles Beard. And at about the same time in the late 1940s when Williams entered the University of Wisconsin and began undergoing rigorous graduate training in history as that subject was understood by Charles Beard, another young historian, James J. Martin (1916-2004), was making the acquaintance of Beard's former student and fellow World War I and World War II revisionist, Harry Elmer Barnes. Martin was uncertain at this time whether he wanted to pursue a career as a revisionist historian, despite the fact that what might be called the seeds of revisionism had been sown in his mind and temperament early on. Even as late as 2002, when he was eighty-six years old and his career was long behind him, he told me, near the beginning of our first telephone conversation, that he didn't really regard himself as a revisionist. He was, he said, an "additionist"—the fellow who comes along after the historical accounts have been written and *adds* what's been (inadvertently or deliberately) left out. It was a good line—and quite accurate, too—but it seems likely to have been one of those clever lines that come to us sometimes like a bolt from the blue, ornamenting the conversation or the manuscript at hand but having no lasting life, no lasting influence. For, in all our subsequent conversations, Martin never repeated it or referred to it in any way. In those later talks, he always referred to himself and his intellectual comrades at arms as "revisionists," and never as anything else.

He himself had first been drawn to revisionism, he told me in March 2003 in a face-to-face conversation that took place over the course of an unsettled, forboding afternoon, while in his last year as an undergraduate history major at the University of New Hampshire. It was the weather that was unsettled and forboding that afternoon: the sky was the blue/grey of slate and the weatherman was forecasting a blizzard (by the time it hit, my wife and I had driven up the road a piece, as far as Denver, so it was there that we got snowed in for three days). But inside Martin's unpretentious suburban-style home the atmosphere was very different—warm, hospitable, with a bottomless pot of spaghetti and much good company. He had been born in 1916 (September 18, to be exact), he told me, "in New Brunswick, Canada. My father was an unschooled, Irish

immigrant laborer, and my mother was a Maine school teacher. I don't know how those two ever hooked up. Looking back on it, I couldn't imagine two persons less likely to have hit it off—in terms of background, that is. I couldn't see how they ever made any sense out of it.”

They didn't, for long. “Eventually, my father sold what he had going there in Canada and bought a farm in New Hampshire, just about in time to experience the total collapse of the agricultural price scene in 1921.” At about that same time, Martin's mother took ill and died. He was five years old. For the next several years, he “ended up being passed around from one housekeeper to another”—and also, more importantly, from one Catholic school to another. “I spent eight years in Catholic schools. My father was not known to have ever been in a church of any kind. He despised all churches. But he thought that Catholic schools were better, so he put me in them.” Then “I went to a Catholic high school in the '30s—two of them, in fact: one taught by Christian Brothers and the other taught by nuns. Looking back, I can see they weren't easy. They hit you with a lot of stuff. I had five years of Latin. Today, you prescribe Latin, you'd probably be shot in your tracks.”

Rigorous though the educational program might have been, however, Martin was not inspired by it to pursue a life of scholarship. “I was a football player. I wasn't interested in books. I was a football player, and I had a high school reputation in New Hampshire.” That high school reputation won him a scholarship to the University of New Hampshire, where he was no more scholarly than he'd ever been up to this time in his life. Then he got sick. “In June of '39 during the final exams, I came down with pneumonia. I was the only sick kid out of two thousand students. I was in the school hospital, Hood House, donated by a big dairy producer in Boston, H. P. Hood. I was the only patient in it. I kept the whole place open for weeks. I was on what they called the 'danger list.' That meant you weren't expected to live the rest of the week. I was on that list for seven weeks. Eventually they shipped me in an ambulance to the nearby city of Dover, which had a much bigger hospital, and I eventually got well there.”

By the time it ended, however, the illness had taken a fearsome toll. “I lost 50 pounds. I lost all my hair. I had to go to bed at six o'clock every night for a year and a half.” And even after he had got well, he wasn't really *that* well. “They couldn't use me in the war, you know. I remember one recruiting officer looked at my x-rays, and he said, ‘Go home.’ He said, ‘If we're invaded, we'll call you.’ That's how bad they thought I looked. I wasn't declared fit again until 1947.”

There was, as a result, a sort of silver lining in that long period of convalescence. "I had been in an ROTC regiment at the University of New Hampshire which was in the advance wave of the invasion of Casablanca in November 1942, and I would have been in that for damned sure, and the beach was littered with guys who got killed that I played football with. I told myself, 'Well, you lucky bastard, you lost your football career, but you survived the war.'" The loss of the football career was, nevertheless, a difficult cross for Martin to bear. "I was a psychological wreck. Everything I had lived for I couldn't do anymore." Then, "to do something, I learned all about books, and then started reading, and became a historian."

Of course, it wasn't quite that simple. Up to the time of his illness, Martin had changed majors frequently; his focus wasn't on graduating, but on taking classes that interested him and playing football. Now "I looked back on it. I said, 'Well, you're going to be here forever if you don't figure out what the hell you're going to major in. You're going to be here that long just to get enough credits to graduate.' So I looked over my record, and I had more good credits in history than anything, so that's the direction I went." He had the credits in history because "I liked history, and I was good at it, and I got good grades. I could remember. I had a good memory." So he majored in history. And by the time he was in his long-postponed senior year and getting ready to graduate, he had begun to notice that "people were neglecting this, and that, and the other thing. The establishment was ignoring things. That had something to do with my getting into revisionism."

For example, "I remember running across the first American-Korean War. It wasn't in 1950. It was in June 1871. The Far East American fleet of five ships landed four hundred marines, who tackled a whole bunch of Koreans in a fortress at the mouth of the Han River and killed six hundred of them in one day. There were a lot of big battles that didn't have six hundred dead in them. Yet I had never heard a word about it."

"I remember the first time I ran across the big story about all the Americans that deserted the trenches in World War I. A whole bunch of them just walked off. There were so many, the military police cooperated with the French to create two big camps to put them in when they rounded them up. They were never tried. They were never shot. I first read about it going through *The New York Times* in microfilm looking for something else, and there was a big spread on this story over a period of about four months. There was a congressional investigation planned

but it was abandoned, and I gather these guys figured, ‘Look, this will cause more trouble than it will solve. Let’s just forget about it.’ And as a result, this episode has disappeared from the history books.”

Nor was this all. There was more. “I didn’t know the United States had a poison gas factory in World War I, an immense factory in Aberdeen, Maryland. It’s northeast of Baltimore. It outproduced Germany, Russia, Italy, France, and Austria combined—and England, too.”

By now, Martin was in Tucson, doing graduate work at the University of Arizona. “How I happened to go to Arizona from New Hampshire? The main reason was they had a summer semester in Tucson. You could get a whole semester’s work in one summer. Usually you could only get half that, and that was the main reason I went there. Also, just to get a change of climate.”

The experience proved frustrating, however, because of what Martin called “the deportation of the young teachers. The young professors were taking commissions in the Navy to escape getting drafted into the Army, and I exhausted their resources in one semester. The courses I needed for my master’s degree were taught by men who weren’t there anymore. They were on leave. And no school fired anybody who took a Navy commission like that. They all returned there as a rule.” So Martin dropped out. “I came back home and took a job teaching at a New Hampshire high school, and then started fishing around for another school, and wrote letters to various places. And I got a favorable response from Michigan after they saw my grades from Arizona. I transferred some of them and went there three summers to get a master’s degree.”

By now Martin had come upon a few more of those inconvenient facts that tended to be neglected or ignored by most historians.

“One subject I got interested in that I was going to write about, and I took a lot of notes on, was how much of the Civil War was fought by boys, twelve-year-olds, thirteen-year-olds, fourteen-year-olds. I found a piece by a nurse. She was so shaken by what had happened to her that she couldn’t write about it for thirty-five years. She was on a floor where every kid died of gangrene after having an arm or a leg lopped off—twelve-year-olds, thirteen-year-olds, fourteen-year-olds. The Union Army was loaded with children. I’m sure the same was true in the South too. Big farm kids who passed themselves off as two, three years older. A lot of this we know because, after the war, when Congress passed the pension bill, I think in 1882, covering the Union veterans, they had to verify the birth dates of the surviv-

ing veterans to qualify them. And there was a whole operation run by a general, a Union general, that verified these birth dates and as a result of that, we know a great deal about the extreme youth of a whole bunch of people who qualified for pensions though they were just boys during their term of service. Gettysburg was fought mainly by boys. Now it's reenacted by forty-year-old drunks."

Martin had also come upon interesting evidence of "who made the big bucks out of" the U.S. Civil War.

"And boy, there were immense fortunes made out of that. There was an economist named White who used to write about this in the immediate years right after the war, '66, '67, '68, '69. He wrote a series of articles dealing with some of the people who made big dough. You know, the stock markets got so busy they had to have two sessions. They had to have both a downtown and an uptown stock market—the New York Stock Exchange. And of course, the people who sold gold to the government made a real killing. There were a number of multi-millionaires and billionaires. All the post-Civil War fortunes had their origins in supplying the Northern armies. Actually there's a succession of economists, historical economists, in the post-Civil War period who keep bringing this subject up all the way down into the administration of Benjamin Harrison. They were still confronting the people who made the money. But by that time, everybody had decided to forget all about that. We were all heroes. We were all giants."

Then there was the inconvenient information Martin had turned up regarding

"how eager the young men of the nation were to join the army in 1917. Over a million young men dodged the draft. The army never found a one of them. Of course, they didn't have any machinery to look for them. The majority took isolated work on farms, other places where they weren't concentrated, and the army authorities never found a damned one of them, as near as I can figure out. And the gang they did round up—God, horrible pieces, terrible examples, of humanity. The intelligence tests they administered, in particular. I think the whole bunch combined, Black and White together, ranked moron. A lot of soldiers made money in the first war if they could write. The great majority could not write a letter home, so a lot of guys made a few bucks on the side writing letters home for A, B, C, D, and E, whoever couldn't write. They charged them a small sum, but they had so much business that they didn't have to charge them much. A great many letters written home were not by the writers, were not by the authors. Somebody else wrote for them."

Perhaps most fascinating of all there was the vast treasure trove of neglected lore Martin had begun unearthing about an amazing human dynamo named Benjamin R. Tucker (1854-1939)—journalist, editor, printer, publisher, and bookseller. The progeny of Quakers, Unitarians, and Abolitionists, Tucker was suckled on radicalism and deflowered while still a youth by early feminist radical Victoria Woodhull. An ardent exponent of freedom in all its forms—free love, freethought, and, of course, the political freedom of the individual—Tucker sought to eliminate marriage, God, and the State. He founded and edited *Liberty*, in its day (1881-1908) the largest-circulation anarchist periodical in the world. He gathered around him an extraordinary group of writers and intellectuals and became the spearhead for what probably should be regarded, from our vantage in time, as the first, almost entirely forgotten, libertarian movement. Tucker commissioned and published (and, in some cases, personally created) the original English translations of Proudhon's *What Is Property?*, Bakunin's *God and the State*, Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, and Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own*. He brought out American editions of works by Oscar Wilde, Herbert Spencer, Emile Zola, John Henry Mackay, and many others. He studied and helped to popularize the work of earlier American individualists who had come to reject the State—Josiah Warren, Stephen Pearl Andrews, Lysander Spooner—thereby establishing the first serious claim to a genuinely libertarian tradition in American intellectual history. And all of this had been neglected, ignored, utterly forgotten. Martin decided to go for a Ph.D. and do his dissertation in one of the “neglected” fields once vigorously championed by James Harvey Robinson: intellectual history. Published as a book in 1953 under the title *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827-1908*, Martin's dissertation galvanized scholarly interest in uniquely American libertarian traditions and remains today, more than half a century after its original publication, a standard work in the field.¹⁸⁴

It was while he was finishing up his work on this dissertation that Martin received a mailing from the noted historian and polemicist Harry Elmer Barnes. Barnes had written to graduate students and faculty in history departments all over the United States, advertising a new pamphlet he had just written and self-published: *Revisionism and the*

184 See, for example, William O. Reichert, *Partisans of Freedom: A Study in American Anarchism* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1976), pp. viii-ix. See also David DeLeon, *The American As Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 173.

Historical Blackout. Martin ordered a copy and, once he'd read it, wrote to Barnes commenting on it. Barnes wrote back. Before long, the two men were corresponding regularly, sometimes as often as four times a week, and Martin had become a frequent guest in Barnes's home, first in Cooperstown, New York, then in Malibu, California.

Reading *Revisionism and the Historical Blackout* that fateful year in the late 1940s seems to have had a powerful effect on James J. Martin. His dissertation on the American individualist anarchists was the last book he ever wrote on intellectual history. After reading Barnes, making his acquaintance, and becoming his close friend and protégé, he turned his attention instead to what had long preoccupied Barnes: the two major wars of the first half of the 20th Century. Martin's second book, published in 1963, was a mammoth two-volume study of *American Liberalism and World Politics, 1931-1941: Liberalism's Press and Spokesmen on the Road Back to War Between Mukden and Pearl Harbor*. His third, *Revisionist Viewpoints: Essays in a Dissident Historical Tradition* (1971), focused entirely on issues relating to the two world wars. His fourth, *The Saga of Hog Island and Other Essays in Inconvenient History* (1977), did the same. His fifth, *Beyond Pearl Harbor: Essays on Some Historical Consequences of the Crisis in the Pacific in 1941* (1981), bears a title that speaks for itself. So does 1984's *The Man Who Invented "Genocide": The Public Career and Consequences of Raphael Lemkin*, the 20th Century Polish academic and bureaucrat who coined the term that has become so ubiquitous in the years since. And so does *An American Adventure in Bookburning: In the Style of 1918* (1988).

In short, the influence of Barnes seems to have transformed an intellectual historian interested in 19th Century America into a World War I and World War II revisionist on the pattern of Barnes himself. There was one important difference, however. Barnes was an early 20th Century "progressive." He believed that government had a positive, valuable role to play in "correcting" the "market failures" and other "deficiencies" of "capitalism." He supported the domestic programs of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, objecting only to his foreign policy. Martin, by contrast, was a libertarian—an individualist anarchist whose most important intellectual influences where political philosophy was concerned were Benjamin R. Tucker and Max Stirner (1806-1856), the German philosopher whose magnum opus, *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum* (1845), Tucker had published in its first English-language edition (*The Ego and Its Own*) in 1907. Barnes practiced revisionism in order to advance his views on war and peace, in order to make the world a better,

safer place to live in. Martin, on the other hand, was never much of a do-gooder, much less a world-saver. As he explained to a panel of interviewers from *Reason* magazine late in 1975, “my interest in [revisionism] is not necessarily activated by ideological considerations. It’s more of a technical interest in getting the record straight.” He had never, he said at that time, been much concerned with

doing good or bringing about a set of better social conditions, an improvement in the race or any long-range programs of that sort. My friend Harry Elmer Barnes was very much so motivated. But I was nowhere nearly as involved in his objectives as I was in his work. We often worked for totally different reasons at the same thing. I have no compulsions to save the world or save the human race.¹⁸⁵

Still, it seems evident that if Martin *ever* harbored *any* hopes about the effect his writings might have on his readers, what he hoped for was very different from what Barnes hoped for. Barnes wanted to steer American government away from what he regarded as wasteful and destructive policies. Martin, if he wanted anything other than just to get the record straight, wanted to steer American society away from government. Barnes sought to publicize the truth about the world wars in order to convince his fellow Americans that their government should use the resources it was wasting on unnecessary and destructive foreign conflicts to make improvements at home, improvements like ending poverty and stamping out crime. Martin sought to publicize the truth about the world wars in order to get the record straight—and perhaps to convince his fellow Americans that it was dangerous and foolhardy to trust any group of men, even if they called themselves “the government,” with the kind of power you need to commit destruction and carnage on that sort of worldwide scale.

Martin was awarded his Ph.D. by the University of Michigan in 1949. He began writing his books and embarked on a series of teaching assignments. Northern Illinois University was on his itinerary, as were San Francisco State College and Deep Springs College in the Southern California desert, the school *Newsweek* once described as “the most isolated, obscure, and selective college in the entire U.S.”¹⁸⁶ He ended up in Larkspur, Colorado at Rampart College, an institution founded and run by the legendary libertarian journalist, broadcaster, author, editor, and teacher Robert LeFevre (1911-1986). LeFevre had founded what

¹⁸⁵ “Introducing Revisionism: An Interview with James J. Martin.” *Reason* January 1976, pp. 14-15.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

he originally called the Freedom School in 1957, building the campus part time with a crew of volunteers and a few paid workers while he labored full time as the editorial page editor of the daily *Gazette-Telegraph* in nearby Colorado Springs. At first, once the physical plant was ready for use, he conducted only summer sessions, employing a roster of part-time lecturers that included such prominent libertarian intellectuals as “Rose Wilder Lane, Milton Friedman, F. A. Harper, Frank Chodorov, Leonard Read, Gordon Tullock, G. Warren Nutter, Bruno Leoni, James J. Martin, and even Ludwig von Mises.”¹⁸⁷ But the Freedom School prospered, attracting new funding and a steady stream of students. LeFevre decided it might be possible to quit his full-time job and devote his entire energy to this educational project. In 1965, he renamed the school Rampart College, launched a quarterly journal, and began hiring full-time faculty for his planned expansion into a regular, four-year, degree-granting liberal arts college.

IV

James J. Martin: Historian and Pamphleteer

One of his first hires was James J. Martin, whom he lured away from Deep Springs by offering the chairmanship of the Rampart history department. Martin quit his job and moved to Colorado, only to discover that LeFevre’s plans had been bigger than his resources and Rampart College was not going to become a full-fledged college after all. In 1968, three years after his arrival, the former Freedom School folded for good. As LeFevre tells the story in his autobiography, he first discussed the situation with the chairman of his economics department, W. H. Hutt, and released him from his contract. Then he called Martin “into my office and released him from his contract, too.”

Martin stalked from the office. A day later, I received a letter in which he informed me that he was prepared to hire legal representation and that no matter how hard I tried, he was going to hold me to the contract. [...] I had four more years in which I would pay his full salary plus provide him with housing. Any failure on my part and he’d see

¹⁸⁷ Llewellen H. Rockwell, Jr., “The Wisdom of LeFevre.” July 2001. Online at http://www.mises.org/freemarket_detail.asp?control=362&sortorder=articledate

me in court! Martin had been among those most ardent in insisting that government was totally unnecessary. But not if he needed it in dealing with me.¹⁸⁸

As might be imagined, Martin's version of the debacle is a little different. "I had read so much stuff by LeFevre over the years," he told me that afternoon in Colorado Springs, "all the bawling about the sacredness of contracts, that I said to myself, 'Well, for once I'm going to hold him to one and see what he does.' And I think he began to realize the absurdity of his situation—spending years saying all these kinds of things about contracts, and then trying to run out on one. He could easily have done it. I didn't have the resources to chase him. And he knew it. I didn't threaten to sue him. I didn't. I expected him to just walk away. But he had the backing of two, three, four millionaires [...] and sixty-thousand dollars was no money to them. Hell, they spent that maybe at the casinos on weekends."

So Martin got his sixty thousand. And he decided to stay on in Colorado.

"I just got tired of running. I ran back and forth across this country from coast to coast, including both coasts, and I said to myself, 'What's the point of all this? Aren't you tired of it?' And I said, 'Yeah, I am.' I had no dependents. So I said, 'I'll just stay here and revert back to my old way of living.' I put myself through three university degrees by living like a concentration camp rat, and I said, 'Well, I'll just go back to that again. Cut down on this, cut down on that, live within my means, bank interest, whatever.' And here I am. I've survived thirty-five years living like that. I've stayed off the labor market, felt pretty good, wrote a lot of books. I've published over two million words."

He also published at least a dozen books by other writers in that thirty-five-year span, most of them in the first decade after his departure from Rampart College. For Martin put only a portion of his sixty-thousand-dollar windfall into an account, in order to earn the "bank interest" he referred to. The rest of it he invested in an enterprise that never earned him very much, if anything, unless perhaps it was the title of most influential libertarian book publisher since Benjamin R. Tucker—an accolade I fancy he would have liked. Rampart College, as has been noted, shut down in 1968. Harry Elmer Barnes died that same year, aged seventy-nine. And later in 1968, Ralph Myles, Publisher of Colo-

¹⁸⁸ Robert LeFevre, *A Way to Be Free: The Autobiography of Robert LeFevre*, Vol. 2. (Culver City, CA: Pulpless.com, 1999), p. 475.

rado Springs, Colorado issued its debut volume, a festschrift in Barnes's honor, featuring essays by former students, former colleagues, and fellow scholars. *Harry Elmer Barnes, Learned Crusader: The New History in Action* was followed in short order by reprints of various revisionist works Martin felt were neglected or ignored: Barnes's *In Quest of Truth and Justice*, William Henry Chamberlain's *America's Second Crusade*, Arthur Ekirch's seminal *The Civilian and the Military: A History of the American Antimilitarist Tradition*. In 1970, Martin issued a revised and enlarged edition, the first edition in paperback, of his own *Men Against the State*. In 1975, he teamed up with the younger libertarian historian Leonard P. Liggio to edit together a book from the texts of a series of papers presented at a "conference held in 1971 at Gibson Island under the chairmanship of Dr. Felix Morley and sponsored by the Institute for Humane Studies." The resulting volume, *Watershed of Empire: Essays on New Deal Foreign Policy*, was published by Ralph Myles in 1976.

As Martin recalled it that afternoon in Colorado Springs, "I began Ralph Myles to print just one thing"—the Barnes festschrift—"and then it just ballooned, and I found myself saying, 'Well, I've got to get this out, I've got to get that out, this hasn't been done for years.' And I ended up with a string of titles. We went in two directions. Originally I was going to deal mainly with what you might call revisionism and then I got into—I had already been involved for years with—libertarianism." In addition to his own *Men Against the State*, Ralph Myles reissued Benjamin R. Tucker's *State Socialism and Anarchism* and *Other Essays*, Lysander Spooner's *No Treason*, Etienne de la Boetie's *The Will to Bondage*, and numerous other volumes of immense interest to anyone concerned with the libertarian intellectual tradition, both in this country and in Europe. Each of these titles was graced by a James J. Martin introduction, and each of those introductions was a small marvel of esoteric information and sound scholarship. It is difficult to imagine what the would-be historian of libertarian thought would be up against if James J. Martin had never written *Men Against the State* and had never founded Ralph Myles, Publisher. All those who care about such matters owe him a profound debt of gratitude.

I found Jim Martin cheerful, if more than a bit cynical, when I visited him that unsettled afternoon a little more than a year before his death. I also found him still mentally sharp as ever, that amazing memory seemingly unimpaired, engaged as ever with the issues and events of the day. "What Barnes and I liked to think," he told me that afternoon in Colorado Springs,

“we didn’t say, we never got into it to any degree, but I believe, essentially, we thought we were the supporters of the Republic. Like Gore Vidal does now. Gore Vidal sounds just like we did. I have both of his last two books here. He’s not a scholar, but he’s such a good writer that, in each case, I just sat and read right through the whole book. I didn’t put it down. He understands history as well as anybody I’ve ever known, Ph.D. or no degrees at all; it’s irrelevant for our purposes to know that he didn’t go through the rat race that we did.”

“Anyway, the attitude Barnes and I generally had was that we were just like Vidal thinks of himself now—a bulwark of the Republic. We were supporting George Washington’s foreign policy—stay home, keep the hell out of other people’s affairs, no alliances with anybody, improve your own country, and so on. You see? The opposition to us captured the country in 1917 and they’ve had it ever since.”

V

The Libertarian Historians and Their Colleagues on the New Left

As Martin saw it, he and Barnes “were fighting a rear-guard action against a crowd of imperialists and world meddlers.” And they’d lost that rear-guard action. But Martin’s lead as a revisionist was taken up by several younger men who shared both his individualistic and anarchistic views and his admiration for Barnes and Beard. Chief among these was Murray N. Rothbard (1926-1995), an economist who had earned his Ph.D. at Columbia and nursed a strong secondary interest in history (strong enough to carry him through a number of purely historical works, including a four-volume narrative of America from colonization in the 17th Century to the end of the revolution in 1784). There were also Leonard P. Liggio, Ralph Raico, and Ronald Hamowy, all born in the early-to-mid 1930s and destined to pursue academic careers in history; and four members of the Baby Boom generation—Robert Higgs (a borderline boomer, born in 1944), Joseph Stromberg, Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, and Thomas J. DiLorenzo.

Since both the New Left historians and the libertarian historians derived from Beard and Barnes, it might be expected that their schol-

arly and polemical paths would cross—that they would know of each other and, perhaps, even collaborate on projects of mutual interest and benefit. And so, in fact, it was. Referring to Williams’s pioneering *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), Buhle and Rice-Maximin note that “[t]he year of the publication of *Tragedy* saw the appearance of *Studies on the Left*, the first of the U.S. ‘new left’ publications, engineered principally by Williams devotees.”¹⁸⁹ Novick calls *Studies on the Left* “the first, and in many ways the most important, organized vehicle for the new historiographical left.”¹⁹⁰ In the summer of 1966, Rothbard contributed a review of *The Poverty of Abundance* by A. U. Romasco to *Studies on the Left*. A few years later, he was invited by *Studies on the Left* editors James Weinstein and David Eakins to revise and expand his review for inclusion in an anthology they were putting together. “The Hoover Myth” duly appeared in a volume entitled *For a New America: Essays in History and Politics from Studies on the Left, 1959–1967*, edited by Weinstein and Eakins, which was published in 1970 by Random House.

Meanwhile, Ronald Radosh had contributed an article on “America’s Entry into World War II” to *Left and Right: A Journal of Libertarian Thought*, which was edited by Rothbard. He also collaborated with Leonard Liggio on an article on “Henry A. Wallace and the Open Door,” which appeared in 1971 in an anthology called *Cold War Critics*. The following year, in 1972, Radosh and Rothbard co-edited a book, *A New History of Leviathan*, which included an Introduction by William Appleman Williams and an essay on “American Foreign Policy and National-Security Management” by Leonard Liggio. In 1975, Radosh published *Prophets on the Right: Profiles of Conservative Critics of American Globalism*, including essays on Senator Robert A. Taft, John T. Flynn, Oswald Garrison Villard, Lawrence Dennis, and Charles A. Beard. Since Radosh acknowledges that “Beard was part of the old Progressive tradition,” that he “believed that the Depression would continue and worsen” because the Democrats “would not deal effectively with it by radical measures, such as nationalization of the banks.” and that the status Beard desired for the United States was that of (quoting fellow historian Samuel Eliot Morison) “a socialized, collectivist state in isolation,” it may seem somewhat difficult to make out in just what sense Radosh believes Beard can be reasonably described as a “conservative.”¹⁹¹ (This is an issue to which

189 Buhle and Rice-Maximin, op.cit., p. 117.

190 Novick, op.cit., p. 420.

191 Ronald Radosh, *Prophets on the Right: Profiles of Conservative Critics of American Globalism* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1978 [1975]), pp. 11, 25, 40.

I will return in Chapter Five.) But no matter. *Prophets on the Right* is dedicated to William Appleman Williams, and its Acknowledgments section begins with the following sentence: “I am particularly indebted to those two stalwarts of the libertarian Old Right, Leonard P. Liggio and Murray N. Rothbard.” Three years later, in the summer of 1978, Eric Foner, whom Novick describes as “[p]rominent in the second wave” of New Left Historians (just as he describes Barnes as a “second-generation New Historian”), contributed the lead bibliographic essay to the then-current issue of *Literature of Liberty*, a scholarly journal edited by Liggio: a discussion of “Radical Individualism in America: Revolution to Civil War.”¹⁹²

Though the lessons they drew from history differed, as did their policy prescriptions, the New Left Historians, the Libertarian Historians, and the New Historians (or Progressive Historians) all agreed fundamentally on what it was that had actually happened in those periods of American history to which they had all devoted study—and, moreover, about which aspects of what had happened were significant. Charles Beard argued, for example, that large corporations worked for a system of centralized federal regulation of their own businesses, late in the 19th Century, because they considered such a system preferable to the existing “anarchy” of different state regulations.¹⁹³ In 1963, in *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916*, Gabriel Kolko, one of the most prolific and influential of the many protégés of William Appleman Williams, argued that, “contrary to the consensus of historians, it was not the existence of monopoly that caused the federal government to intervene in the economy, but the lack of it.” According to Kolko, “many key businessmen” at the turn of the 20th Century “articulated a conscious policy favoring the intervention of the national government into the economy,” in an effort to put their smaller competitors out of business and create a monopoly-like power for themselves.¹⁹⁴ Or, as libertarian journalist and editor Roy A. Childs, Jr. put it in 1971 in his essay “Big Business and the Rise of American Statism,” a “trend in the last three decades of the nineteenth century [...] towards growing competition in the United States” led “various big businessmen in different fields” to lobby “the state to regulate the economy on their behalf.”¹⁹⁵

192 Novick, op.cit., pp. 420, 179.

193 Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *A Basic History of the United States* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1944), pp. 316–319.

194 Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 5.

195 Childs, op.cit., pp. 30–31.

In fact, one can assemble the revisionist works of the New Historians, the New Left Historians, and the Libertarian Historians into a coherent narrative of American history from the Revolution through the early days of the Cold War. In effect, this is precisely what Gore Vidal has done, in his American Chronicle novels. This is not to say that Vidal has been directly influenced by all the historians mentioned in this chapter—though he definitely has been directly influenced by some of them. In a January 1998 interview with the online magazine *Salon*, for example, he called William Appleman Williams “our greatest historian.”¹⁹⁶ He wrote in the Afterword to *The Golden Age* of “our pre-eminent historian, Charles A. Beard” and of “furtive signs of a revival among younger academics of the realist historians—anti-ideologues like Richard Hofstadter and William Appleman Williams.”¹⁹⁷ In his short essay “Japanese Intentions in the Second World War” (originally written as a pair of letters to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* in December 2000), Vidal recommends “the latest, if not last, word on the subject” of Harry Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan: “*The Decision to Use the Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* by Gar Alperovitz.”¹⁹⁸ And the title Vidal chose for the small paperback compilation of topical essays he published in 2002, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*—a phrase taken from Charles Beard which had been used previously as the title for another collection of essays on U.S. foreign policy edited by Harry Elmer Barnes—may perhaps be said to speak for itself. “One of the interesting things about Vidal’s little book, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*,” James J. Martin told me that winter afternoon in Colorado Springs, “is that he didn’t realize that the revisionists had used the same title fifty years before he did.” But, like the revisionists, he saw its appropriateness.¹⁹⁹

In the chapter that follows, I discuss three representative cases in which Vidal’s version of American history differs from the version most Americans encounter in school, comparing Vidal’s version with the writings of the American revisionist historians whose research bears it out.

196 Chris Haines, “Gore’s Wars.” *Salon* 14 January 1998. Online at http://www.salon.com/books/int/1998/01/cov_si_14int.html

197 Vidal, *The Golden Age*, op.cit., pp. 466, 467.

198 Gore Vidal, “Japanese Intentions in the Second World War” in *The Last Empire: Essays, 1992–2000* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 462.

199 At least one other author also saw its appropriateness between Barnes and Vidal. This is longtime University of Texas historian Robert A. Divine, whose *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* was published in 2000 by Texas A&M University Press. I am indebted to Jeffrey Rogers Hummel for information about this volume.

FOUR

SOME AMERICAN WARS—BOTH HOT AND COLD— THROUGH REVISIONIST EYES

I

The U.S. Civil War—the Revisionist View

As Gore Vidal presents it in *Lincoln*, the U.S. Civil War was caused, not by slavery, but by the intransigence of President Lincoln, who insisted adamantly that no state could legitimately secede from the Union and that the Union could never be broken up. In Vidal's account, Lincoln cared nothing for the plight of the slaves. Nor did he care about the U.S. Constitution's guarantees of individual liberty: he shut down newspapers that opposed the war, imprisoning their editors; he held prisoners indefinitely, flouting *habeas corpus*; he imposed the first military draft in the nation's history, then used troops to crush the riots that resulted; he financed his war by imposing and collecting the nation's first tax on incomes, despite the lack of any constitutional basis for such a levy.

Vidal might well have found inspiration for such a view of the war in the writings of Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams. For, as Beard wrote in 1927 in Volume II of *The Rise of American Civilization*,

Since [...] the abolition of slavery never appeared in the platform of any great political party, since the only appeal ever made to the electorate on that issue was scornfully repulsed, since the spokesman of the Republicans emphatically declared that his party never intended to interfere with slavery in the states in any shape or form, it seems reasonable to assume that the institution of slavery was not the fundamental issue during the epoch preceding the bombardment of Fort Sumter.²⁰⁰

200 Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), Vol. II, pp. 39-40.

Williams agreed. In his *Contours of American History* (1961), he wrote that “neither Lincoln nor the majority of northerners entered the war in an abolitionist frame of mind or entertaining abolitionist objectives.”²⁰¹ Williams is even more explicit in his 1976 book *America Confronts a Revolutionary World: 1776–1976*. “Put simply,” he writes, “the cause of the Civil War was the refusal of Lincoln and other northerners to honor the revolutionary right of self-determination—the touchstone of the American Revolution.” And this was rank hypocrisy on Lincoln’s part, according to Williams, for on January 12, 1848, the Great Emancipator had intoned:

Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the *right* to rise up, and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better. [...] Nor is this right confined to cases in which the whole people of an existing government may choose to exercise it. Any portion of such people that *can, may* revolutionize, and make their *own*, of so much of the territory as they inhabit.²⁰²

Joseph R. Stromberg, the historian who touched off the current wave of serious revisionist investigation of the U.S. Civil War among libertarian scholars, had read both Beard and Williams. And in his influential essay, “The War for Southern Independence: A Radical Libertarian Perspective,” published in 1979, while he was still a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Florida, he staked out a position even more radical than anything either Beard or Williams had ever proposed—something very like the vision of the war laid out in Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*. Stromberg didn’t go into a lot of detail in presenting his take on the war, but two other Libertarian historians have done so. These are Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, in *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men* (1996), and Thomas J. DiLorenzo, in *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* (2002).

Hummel’s view of the Civil War is remarkably like Vidal’s. “Historians and buffs debate the fundamental causes of the American Civil War almost as hotly today as the combatants did then,” he writes. “We can simplify our understanding of the Civil War’s causes, however, if we follow the advice of one eminent historian, Eric Foner, and ask two separate questions. Why did the southern states want to leave the Union? And why did the northern states refuse to let them go?” These are two separate questions, Hummel insists, because “[e]ven if slavery explains

²⁰¹ William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland, OH: World, 1961), p. 299.

²⁰² William Appleman Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World: 1776–1976* (New York: William Morrow, 1976), pp. 113, 111.

why the southern states left the Union, it does not necessarily either explain or justify the national government's refusal to recognize their independence." In fact, he maintains, "[n]ot only does slavery fail to explain why the northern states resorted to coercion, but letting the lower South go in peace was a viable, untried antislavery option. As the most militant abolitionists themselves demonstrated, there was no contradiction between condemning slavery and advocating secession."²⁰³

In fact, as Hummel points out, one of the most prominent leaders of the abolitionist movement, William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the weekly abolitionist paper *The Liberator* and one of the organizers of the leading abolitionist organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, was an enthusiastic proponent of secession—for the North. Garrison and his followers "felt that this best hastened the destruction of slavery by allowing the free states to get out from under the Constitution's fugitive slave provision." The seceded North, in Garrison's vision, would have "become a haven for runaway slaves."²⁰⁴

Why did President Lincoln choose another path—the use of military force against the seceded Southern states? In August of 1862, according to Hummel, Lincoln answered this question. "My paramount object in this struggle," the president said,

is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help save the Union.²⁰⁵

In effect, Lincoln refused to allow, first the lower South, then the entire Confederacy, to go in peace because he was committed to a conception of the United States as a perpetual nation, with whose central government the component states had no right to end their association—he was committed, not to a voluntary Union, but to a compulsory one.

In defense of this compulsory Union, according to DiLorenzo, Lincoln implemented a series of unconstitutional acts, including launching an invasion of the South without consulting Congress, as required by the Constitution; declaring martial law; blockading the

²⁰³ Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men: A History of the American Civil War* (Chicago, Open Court, 1996), pp. 3, 8.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 351, 21.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Southern ports; suspending the right of habeas corpus for the duration of his administration; imprisoning without trial thousands of *Northern* citizens; arresting and imprisoning newspaper publishers who were critical of him; censoring all telegraph communication; nationalizing the railroads; creating several new states without the consent of the citizens of those states; ordering Federal troops to interfere with elections in the North by intimidating Democratic voters; deporting a member of Congress, Clement L. Vallandigham of Ohio, for criticizing the administration's income tax proposal at a Democratic Party rally; confiscating private property; confiscating firearms in violation of the Second Amendment; and effectively gutting the Ninth and Tenth amendments to the Constitution, among other things.²⁰⁶

"One victim of Lincoln's suppression of Northern newspapers," DiLorenzo writes, "was Francis Key Howard of Baltimore, the grandson of Francis Scott Key." Howard spent "nearly two years in a military prison without being charged and without a trial of any kind." "Fort Lafayette in New York Harbor," he notes, "came to be known as the 'American Bastille' because it housed so many political prisoners during the Lincoln administration." At one point, "Fort Lafayette was filled with newspaper editors from all over the country who had questioned the wisdom of Lincoln's military invasion and his war of conquest."²⁰⁷

DiLorenzo quotes Clinton Rossiter in support of his contention that Lincoln's war policies were widely regarded as unconstitutional even at the time of their original enactment: "This amazing disregard for the... Constitution was considered by nobody as legal." That being the case, however, one must wonder how Lincoln explained his policies to the people around him at the time. According to DiLorenzo, the president

"justified" his unconstitutional power grab by "discovering" presidential powers in the Constitution that no previous president, or, indeed, anyone at all, had ever noticed. Specifically, he claimed that the commander-in-chief clause of the Constitution, when combined with the duty of the president to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed," gave him *carte blanche* in ignoring any and all laws, and the Constitution itself, in the name of presidential "war powers."²⁰⁸

It will be noted that DiLorenzo indulges a marked taste for the polemical and tends toward more than a bit of hyperbole in his writing. Lincoln does not seem really to have believed that he had "*carte blanche*

206 Thomas J. DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* (New York: Prima, 2002), pp. 131-132.

207 *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134, 140, 147.

208 *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 134.

in ignoring any and all laws,” for example; he does seem, however, to have believed that he had *carte blanche* to ignore those laws he felt were in conflict with what he saw as his duty—to save the Union, price no object. DiLorenzo has also been accused, by more than one reviewer, of “careless errors of fact, misuse of sources, and faulty documentation.” Richard M. Gamble details these technical criticisms of DiLorenzo’s book at some length in the Spring 2003 issue of *The Independent Review*, and regards them as evidence of a serious problem with DiLorenzo’s scholarship. But even he concedes that “individually these flaws may seem trivial and inconsequential.”²⁰⁹ And so they do: a quotation cited as being on page 60 is in fact on page 61; information attributed to page 316 of a work by a noted Lincoln scholar is instead to be found on the same page of another work by the same scholar; an article cited as having been published in 1988 was in fact published in 1998. Not only are errors of this type (unfortunate though they are) both trivial and inconsequential, but also not a few of them would appear to have resulted from proofreading errors, which can hardly be blamed on the author. In any case, as Peter Novick notes, “when citations [...] are illustrative of a synthetic interpretation arrived at through ‘deep immersion,’ even the demonstration that several citations are faulty is far from constituting a refutation of the thesis they underpin.”²¹⁰ And as Gamble himself acknowledges, DiLorenzo’s book “is essentially correct in every charge it makes against Lincoln,” and is, apart from its too numerous technical errors, “a sobering study in power and corruption.”²¹¹

II

America in the World Wars—A Revisionist Perspective

As Gore Vidal presents it in *Hollywood*, American intervention in World War I was engineered by the United States’ Anglophile president, Woodrow Wilson, who was always eager to help the British out of any

209 Richard M. Gamble, Review of *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* by Thomas J. DiLorenzo. *The Independent Review* Vol. 7, No. 4: Spring 2003, p. 613.

210 Novick, *op.cit.*, p. 220.

211 Gamble, *op.cit.*, pp. 614, 612.

pickle they might have got themselves into. Even after creating a special office of wartime propaganda to “sell” the war to the American public, however—and after following the lead of Lincoln and forcibly silencing those publishers who dared disagree with his policies—Wilson still found it necessary to force young American men into the U.S. army through a revival of the military draft; too few of them were volunteering to come to England’s aid.

When Vidal researched the war, he could well have found all the intellectual ammunition he needed to defend such a view in the works of the Progressive historians, especially Harry Elmer Barnes. Barnes has been discussed as a “second-generation” practitioner of the “New History” pioneered by James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard. But, as Novick points out,

“New Historians” is a designation generally given to the Columbia group around Robinson and Beard, and one which emphasizes methodology; “Progressive Historians” describes a descent from [Frederick Jackson] Turner and Beard, and emphasizes substantive interpretations of American history. The usage employed in the historiographical literature generally depends on the subject under discussion. Because Turner prefigured many New Historical themes, and Robinson, though a Europeanist, was the ultimate Progressive, all three of these men—plus [Carl] Becker, the student of both Turner and Robinson, and an “associate member” of both groups—are here treated as both New and Progressive historians.²¹²

I follow Novick’s lead in this matter, reasoning that, since both Beard and his protégé Barnes were consistent advocates of Progressive reform, as well as advocates of the use of the social sciences to inform historical scholarship, they may be treated as both New and Progressive Historians.

Beard, writing in 1930 in *The Rise of American Civilization*, characterized the “official thesis” as to the origins of World War I in the following way:

Germany and Austria, under autocratic war lords, had long been plotting and preparing for the day when they could overwhelm their neighbors and make themselves masters of the world. England, France, and Russia, on the other hand, all unsuspecting, had pursued ways of innocence, had sincerely desired peace, and made no adequate preparations for a great cataclysm. When England and France were trying to preserve equal rights for all in Morocco, Germany had rattled the sword and now, taking advantage of the controversy over

²¹² Novick, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

the assassination of the Austrian archduke, the Central Powers had leaped like tigers upon their guileless victims.²¹³

Earlier, in a 1926 article for *Current History*, Beard had been even more sardonic: the conventional view of the war's origins, he wrote, amounted to the claim that "three pure and innocent boys—Russia, France and England—without military guile in their hearts, were suddenly assailed while on the way to Sunday school by two deep-dyed villains—Germany and Austria—who had long been plotting cruel deeds in the dark."²¹⁴ By 1926, Barnes had long since recognized this story as so much twaddle, and by 1930 his old mentor had come entirely over to his side of the question.

And Barnes's side of the question was rather different. He wrote in 1926 in *The Genesis of the World War*, that

the only direct and immediate responsibility for the World War falls upon France and Russia, with the guilt about equally distributed. Next in order—far below France and Russia—would come Austria, though she never desired a general European war. Finally, we should place Germany and England as tied for last place, both being opposed to war in the 1914 crisis. Probably the German public was somewhat more favorable to military activities than the English people, but [...] the Kaiser made much more strenuous efforts to preserve the peace of Europe in 1914 than did Sir Edward Grey.²¹⁵

As for U.S. intervention in the war, the reasons for it, Barnes wrote in 1928 in *In Quest of Truth and Justice: De-Bunking the War-Guilt Myth*, were "many and complex." One factor was "the pro-British sources of most of our news concerning Germany in the decade prior to 1914." Another was the "enormous sums" lent to Allied governments by American bankers. Another was the simple fact that President "Wilson was [...] very pro-British in his cultural sympathies. [...] He did not desire to have the United States enter the war if England seemed likely to win without our aid, but as soon as this appeared doubtful he was convinced that we should enter as early as he could persuade Congress and the country to follow him." "Later," Barnes added, "Mr. Wilson added to his pro-British reasons for desiring to enter the War the conception that unless he was at the Peace Conference he could not act decisively in bringing about a peace of justice and permanence." Unfortunately,

213 Beard and Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, op.cit., Vol. II, p. 617.

214 Novick, op.cit., p. 207.

215 Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War* (New York: Knopf, 1926), pp. 658-659.

“[t]here can be little doubt that the entry of the United States into the World War was an unmitigated disaster for all concerned. It made it possible for one set of combatants to win a crushing victory, whereas, as Mr. Wilson once wisely said, the only enduring peace would have to be a peace without victory.”²¹⁶

Earlier, in *The Genesis of the World War*, Barnes had seen another motive, something different from the desire to build a “peace of justice and permanence,” behind Wilson’s change of heart on U.S. participation in the war. He saw lust for power. He suggested that “Wilson’s decision was affected by the conviction that he could assume world leadership only if he led the United States into the war.”²¹⁷ In 1948, looking back, Charles Beard saw a closely related sort of megalomania lurking behind Wilson’s benign, professorial visage—the delusion “that the President of the United States has the constitutional and moral right to proclaim noble sentiments of politics, economics, and peace for the whole world and commit the United States to these sentiments by making speeches and signing pieces of paper on his own motion.”²¹⁸ In 1939, Beard recalled the violence Wilson had done to the Constitution in the service of his megalomaniacal vision: “I saw the freedom of the press trampled by gangs of spies, public and private.”²¹⁹ Thirteen years earlier, in 1926, in *History and Social Intelligence*, Barnes, too, had noted the domestic consequences of Wilson’s commitment of U.S. troops to the European war—the fact that, in prosecuting his war, the president had “sanctioned [...] the most serious inroads upon democratic practice and human liberty in the history of our country, wiping out in three years most of the solid gains of a century and a half of struggle against arbitrary power.”²²⁰

In Barnes’s view, the Versailles Treaty that ended the war, based as it was on the very “charge of German war guilt” that had since been exposed as arrant nonsense, was so grossly unfair to Germany as almost to guarantee a resumption of hostilities within a few years at best.²²¹ And, of course, hostilities did resume in the 1930s. When they did, both Beard

216 Harry Elmer Barnes, *In Quest of Truth and Justice: De-Bunking the War-Guilt Myth* (Colorado Springs, CO: Ralph Myles, 1972 [1928]), pp. 98, 101, 102, 105.

217 Cohen, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

218 Charles A. Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 593.

219 George R. Leighton, “Beard and Foreign Policy” in *Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal*, ed. Howard K. Beale (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976 [1954]), p. 168.

220 Barnes, *History and Social Intelligence*, *op.cit.*, p. 514.

221 Novick, *op.cit.*, p. 215. See also Harry Elmer Barnes, “Revisionism and the Historical Blackout,” *op.cit.*, p. 10.

and Barnes were wary of any analysis of current events that appeared to see merit in another U.S. intervention. Had nothing been learned from the experience of World War I?, they wondered.

Gore Vidal must have wondered much the same thing. As he depicts it in *The Golden Age*, American intervention in the new European War began as a move to protect and advance the interests of England, this time with a fully conscious and deliberate eye on the main chance of replacing England as the leading world power. Specifically, Vidal depicts U.S. intervention in the new war as the result of a plot by President Roosevelt to provoke the Japanese into attacking U.S. territory, thereby justifying the president's pre-existing intention to break his campaign promise not to send American boys to die in any foreign war. Again, Vidal would have needed to look no farther than the works of Beard and Barnes to draw such conclusions. In 1939, in an article in *Harper's* magazine, Beard argued that

[t]he era of universal American jitters over foreign affairs of no vital interest to the United States was opened in full blast about 1890 by four of the most powerful agitators that ever afflicted any nation: Alfred Thayer Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge and Albert J. Beveridge. These were the chief manufacturers of the new doctrine correctly characterized as "imperialism for America" [...] the policy of running out and telling the whole world just the right thing to do.²²²

President Franklin Roosevelt now appeared to be falling for the lure of this policy, Beard reported in February 1941, when he testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations against the Lend-Lease Bill, calling it

an Act to place all the wealth and all the men and women of the United States at the free disposal of the President, to permit him to transfer or carry goods to any foreign government he may be pleased to designate, anywhere in the world, to authorize him to wage undeclared wars for anybody, anywhere in the world, until the affairs of the world are ordered to suit his policies, and for any other purpose he may have in mind now or at any time in the future, which may be remotely related to the contingencies contemplated in the title of this Act.

Beard proposed "that Congress reject this bill with such force that no President of the United States will ever dare again, in all our history, to ask it to suspend the Constitution and the laws of this land and to confer upon him limitless dictatorial powers over life and death."²²³

²²² Leighton, op.cit., pp. 166-167.

²²³ Ibid., p. 182.

It was in the service of this imperialistic conception of the U.S. role in world affairs, Beard thundered in that 1939 *Harper's* article, that "President Roosevelt [...] was maneuvering his country into the war." Convinced that FDR had set up the defenders of Pearl Harbor for a Japanese attack he had deliberately provoked, while making sure that no one in Hawaii knew of it in advance as he himself did, Beard "followed the course of the congressional investigation of Pearl Harbor with an almost microscopic scrutiny. To what the investigation brought forth he added more that he gathered himself," publishing his final statement on the matter in *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941* (1948), only a few months before his death. This book, according to George R. Leighton, Beard's editor at *Harper's*, "was a ponderous volume in which, with detail and fact piled upon detail and fact until the weight is almost crushing, Beard sought to nail down the proof of Roosevelt's deception so firmly that it could not be got loose."²²⁴

Five years later, in 1953, Beard's longtime protégé Harry Elmer Barnes published *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: A Critical Examination of the Foreign Policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Its Aftermath*, dedicated "to the memory of Charles Austin Beard." In this volume, Barnes wrote that "American policy toward Japan in the decade preceding Pearl Harbor [...] was the same hostile policy developed by Stimson during the latter part of the Hoover Administration. It was rejected by President Hoover but was adopted and continued by Roosevelt." According to Barnes, FDR "discussed war with Japan in his earliest cabinet meetings," immediately commenced "an unprecedented peacetime expansion of our naval forces," "laid plans for a naval blockade of Japan in 1937," and relentlessly pursued a "program for the economic strangulation of Japan" that "was generally recognized by Washington authorities" at the time as likely to lead to war. "Roosevelt was personally responsible," Barnes wrote, "for the location of our Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, in which move he disregarded the advice of Admirals Richardson and Stark. The State Department backed Roosevelt and Richardson was relieved of his command."²²⁵

"Japan veritably crawled on its diplomatic belly," Barnes wrote, "from the end of August, 1941, until after the middle of November of that year in an attempt to reach some workable understanding with the United States. The effort met with cold and hostile rebuffs." Finally,

²²⁴ Ibid., pp. 180, 183.

²²⁵ Harry Elmer Barnes, "Summary and Conclusions" in *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, op.cit., pp. 636, 637.

Secretary Hull dispatched an ultimatum to Japan on November 26 which, he fully recognized, decisively closed the door to peace. He himself said that it took the Japanese situation out of diplomacy and handed it over to the Army and Navy. From this time onward it was only a question of when and where the Japanese would attack.

“The decoded Japanese messages between November 26 and December 7 indicated, with relative certainty, when the attack would be made, and they also revealed the strong probability that it would be aimed at Pearl Harbor.” Yet “nothing was done to warn General Short or Admiral Kimmel at Pearl Harbor.”²²⁶

The president, Barnes wrote

expressed himself as greatly “surprised” at both the time and place of the attack, and his apologists have accepted these words at their face value. Neither the President nor his apologists have ever given any satisfactory explanation of why he could have been surprised. [...] If they had any reason at all to be surprised, it was only over the extent of the damage inflicted by the Japanese. But there was little reason even for this, in the light of Roosevelt’s personal order to keep the fleet bottled up like a flock of wooden ducks, of the order that no decoding machine should be sent to Pearl Harbor, and of the fact that Washington had deliberately failed to pass on to Short and Kimmel any of the alarming information intercepted during the three days before the attack. December 7 may have been a “day of infamy,” but the infamy was not all that of Japan.²²⁷

III

A Revisionist Look at America in the Cold War

As Gore Vidal depicts it in *The Golden Age*, the Cold War was started by the United States, by a Truman administration determined to show Joe Stalin who was boss of the postwar world. When Vidal researched the Cold War, he could, once again, have found much intellectual ammunition in the work of Harry Elmer Barnes. The conventional historical account of the origins of the Cold War places much emphasis on the warlike and imperialistic intentions of the Soviet Union, to which the

²²⁶ Ibid., pp. 642, 643, 645.

²²⁷ Ibid., pp. 645-646.

United States was forced, reluctantly, to respond. Barnes would have none of this. In 1953, in his essay “How *Nineteen Eighty-four* Trends Threaten American Peace, Freedom, and Prosperity,” he wrote that

the Russia which is now portrayed as about to spring at the world and devour it is the same Russia that Roosevelt, Harry Hopkins, and other administration leaders presented to the American public as our most potent and suitable ally in the global struggle to suppress totalitarianism, assure democracy, promote liberty, and make peace secure throughout the world. There is very little today in Russian policy, domestic or foreign, which any informed person did not know about back in 1941. In fact, nothing which Russia has done since 1945 has been as aggressive and brutal as the invasion of Poland in the autumn of 1939, the later mass murders of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest in 1940, or the mass murders and deportations of Baltic peoples during the war.

Barnes considered the likelihood of the Soviet Union making war against the United States to be extremely remote. “Even leading Russophobes like Eugene Lyons,” he wrote, “frankly admit that there is every reason to expect that Russia will not start a war.” Moreover, he pointed out, when General Alfred M. Gruenther, General Eisenhower’s chief of staff, testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on March 25, 1952, he too “conceded that he did not believe the Russians will start a war, now or at any time.”²²⁸

But if it was not Soviet aggression that launched the Cold War, what did launch it? Barnes concluded that it was initiated by Truman and Churchill, largely for domestic political reasons, and since then has been used by each of the various governments to cement its rule over its subjects.²²⁹ What Barnes seems to have regarded as the first official act of the Cold War, Truman’s decision to drop the newly developed atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is depicted in conventional accounts of American history as primarily a military decision—an attempt to force Japanese surrender without the necessity of an invasion of the islands and a prolonged land war on Japanese soil, with its attendant American casualties, possibly numbering in the millions. Again, Barnes would have none of this. In May 1958, he published

228 Harry Elmer Barnes, “How ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ Trends Threaten American Peace, Freedom, and Prosperity” in *Revisionism: A Key to Peace and Other Essays*, op.cit., pp. 148–149, 154.

229 Murray N. Rothbard, “Revisionist of the Cold War” in *Harry Elmer Barnes, Learned Crusader*, op.cit., p. 324.

an article in *National Review* called “Hiroshima: Assault on a Beaten Foe,” in which he pointed to

the highly significant MacArthur memorandum to F.D.R. of January 20, 1945. This forty-page memorandum explicitly set forth the terms of an authentic Japanese peace offer which were virtually identical with the final surrender terms that we accepted from the Japanese seven months later—at the cost of countless needlessly expended lives, Japanese and American alike.

In the same article, “Barnes also disclosed, for the first time, the personal testimony of Herbert Hoover that President Truman, by early May, 1945, informed him that he knew of the extensive Japanese peace offers and admitted then that further fighting with the Japanese was really unnecessary.” Barnes concluded “that the major reason for dropping the bomb [...] was a sabre-rattling gesture to the Russians against whom we were already preparing the Cold War.”²³⁰

A very similar view of the Cold War had already been articulated by this time by William Appleman Williams. In 1952, in his first book, *American-Russian Relations, 1781-1947*,

[c]ontradicting the prevailing notion that the Cold War had come about through the actions of an aggressive and expansionist Soviet Union, Williams argued that the United States itself bore the primary responsibility. Even before Pearl Harbor, he wrote, American policymakers had committed themselves to achieving a postwar world dominated by an alliance between Great Britain and the United States. By attempting to force upon Russia this Anglo-American world order without regard to her minimum security needs, American leaders forced an essentially conservative Soviet Union into acting unilaterally in her own defense.

Among the methods Williams claimed American leaders had used in pressuring the Soviets was “brandishing atomic weapons.”²³¹

Williams’s student, Gar Alperovitz, who earned his B.S. in History at the University of Wisconsin in 1959, took his old teacher’s argument and ran with it, devoting two entire books to presenting the relevant details and working out their implications. The first of these books, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, the Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power*, was published in 1965; the second, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an*

²³⁰ Ibid., pp. 327, 328.

²³¹ Maddox, op.cit., p. 14.

American Myth, appeared thirty years later, in 1995. According to Robert James Maddox, *Atomic Diplomacy*

is devoted to showing that from the time Harry S. Truman assumed the presidency he undertook to reverse Franklin D. Roosevelt's policy of cooperation with the Soviet Union, thereby precipitating the Cold War. In direct violation of wartime agreements, some explicit and some understood, Truman sought to construct an American-dominated world order (particularly in Eastern Europe and the Far East) at the end of World War II. When economic coercion failed to achieve this goal, Alperovitz claimed, Truman bided his time until the United States acquired the atomic bomb, with which he meant to cow the Russians into submission. The use of nuclear weapons against an already defeated Japan, according to this view, amounted to a diplomatic rather than a military act. The evidence "strongly suggests," he wrote, that the bombs were used primarily to demonstrate to the Russians the enormous power America would have in its possession during subsequent negotiations. As a lesser factor, he cited the wish to end the war quickly before they [the Soviets] could establish a strong position in the Far East.²³²

To quote Alperovitz himself, from one of his *Cold War Essays* (1970), "the over-riding reason for the use of the bomb was that (implicitly or explicitly) it was judged necessary to strengthen the United States's hand against Russia." Commenting in the same essay on Herbert Feis's then newly published book, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (1966), Alperovitz stresses the author's establishment credentials—"special consultant to three Secretaries of War," "comes close to being our official diplomatic historian"—and judges the volume under consideration, predictably, as the work of a man perhaps overly interested in "avoiding serious criticism of the eminent officials he has known." He comments further:

One [...] would also like to believe that the sole motive of the eminent men he knew was to save lives. It is not pleasant to think that they were so fascinated by their new "master card" of diplomacy that they scarcely considered the moral implications of their act when they used it. That, however, is precisely what the evidence available strongly suggests.²³³

²³² Ibid., pp. 64-65.

²³³ Gar Alperovitz, *Cold War Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1970), pp. 72, 51, 73.

FIVE

THE POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN REVISIONISTS

I

“Left” and “Right,” “Conservative” and “Liberal,” Differentiated Historically

As has been noted, each of the three waves of revisionism that swept through the American history profession during the 20th Century had a particular political ideology behind it. The revisionists led by Charles Beard and Harry Elmer Barnes were known as the “Progressive Historians.” Those galvanized and influenced by William Appleman Williams were known as the “New Left Historians.” And those who followed the lead of James J. Martin and Murray N. Rothbard have come to be known as the “Libertarian Historians.”

At first glance, these three political ideologies may seem quite distinct. The Progressives at the turn of the 20th Century, Eric Foner reminds us, advocated new laws that would “combat the power of the giant corporation,” a monster that had come into existence only in the previous few decades. They also argued for new laws that would “protect consumers, civilize the marketplace, or guarantee industrial freedom at the workplace”—laws “banning child labor and limiting the working hours of women,” laws imposing “the taxation of corporate wealth [...] and state regulation of railroads and public utilities,” laws providing for “old age pensions, minimum wage laws, unemployment insurance, and the regulation of workplace safety.” The Progressives sought further to “reinvigorate democracy by restoring political power to the citizenry.” They backed measures like initiative and referendum, the election of judges, the direct election of U.S. Senators, and the extension of the franchise to women. They endeavored to “improve public transportation,” and they “raised property

taxes in order to spend more money on schools, parks, and other public facilities.”²³⁴

Progressive foreign policy tended to be aggressive, if not positively belligerent. “[T]he expansion of government power” during World War I “struck most Progressives as a golden opportunity. To them, the war offered the possibility of reforming American society along scientific lines, instilling a sense of national unity and self-sacrifice, and expanding social justice. That American power could now disseminate Progressive values around the globe heightened the war’s appeal.”²³⁵

The majority of the New Left acquiesced to most of the Progressive program, accepting the idea of minimum wage laws, old age pensions, workplace safety regulation, and the like, and lending its support to the Progressive goals of expanding democracy, improving public schools, and safeguarding nature. Still, as Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau pointed out in 1971, the New Left

is not a movement easily categorized politically, nor is it defined by politics alone. Some Movement people are Socialists, others are anarchists. Some believe in nonviolence, others are willing to use guns and bombs to attack the oppressors and exploiters. Some are committed only to black liberation, some largely to women’s liberation, and others are dedicated to world revolution. Some focus on altering men’s lifestyles, others are concerned primarily with issues of power and wealth.²³⁶

Writing a few years later, Carl Oglesby—who presided during 1965 and 1966 over Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the dominant New Left student group—described the original New Left as an alliance of “true progressives, classical liberals, humanistic revolutionaries, and libertarians.”²³⁷

Clearly the libertarians and classical liberals in the coalition would not have accepted the Progressive prescriptions for regulating the domestic economy. Neither would they be likely to accept the Progressives’ determination to build and improve public schools and parks. Nor could the anarchists buy into any of these proposals. But three matters at least these three groups could agree on wholeheartedly with their

234 Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York: Norton, 2005), pp. 701–703.

235 *Ibid.*, p. 733.

236 Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, “The Movement’s Themes; the Movement’s Origins” in *Beyond Liberalism: The New Left Views American History*, ed. Irwin Unger (Waltham, MA: Ginn & Co., 1971), p. 334.

237 Carl Oglesby, “The World Before Watergate,” *Inquiry* (May 29, 1978): 14. See also Jeff Rigenbach, *In Praise of Decadence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998), p. 49.

neo-progressive colleagues: racial justice, the various injustices wrought (with government complicity) by large corporations, and the need to rein in the rampantly imperialist foreign policy of the U.S. government. And so it was that these three issues came to be the defining issues of the New Left coalition.

Within only a short time—before the end of the '60s—the libertarians were purged from that coalition, and most of the classical liberals and many of the anarchists followed both them and the libertarians purged at about the same time from the conservative student group, Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), into a newly separate libertarian movement.²³⁸ The political platform of this new movement was simplicity itself, but it was neither Progressive nor New Leftist. The libertarians didn't recommend that the State impose minimum wage laws, old age pensions, or workplace safety regulation; nor did they recommend that the State work to expand democracy, improve public schools, or safeguard nature. The libertarians recommended that the State, in effect, off itself. To promote racial justice, it should get out of the way of African Americans. To right the wrongs it had enabled large corporations to commit, it should cease to help or hinder business in any way. To end its imperialist foreign policy, it should get out of the foreign policy business entirely. "[I]f you wish to know how libertarians regard the State and any of its acts," wrote Murray Rothbard in 1973, "simply think of the State as a criminal band, and all of the libertarian attitudes will logically fall into place."²³⁹

238 M. Stanton Evans, "who drafted the Sharon Statement," the founding statement of Young Americans for Freedom, told interviewer Rebecca E. Klatch in 1983 that "[t]he impulse behind both organizations [YAF and SDS] was common libertarianism: both believed society was too regimented, government too big. There was a strong impulse toward personal freedom. Many of the SDS statements I agreed with." Nor was Evans alone among young "conservatives" in feeling this way. U.S. Congressman Dana Rohrabacher of Southern California (R-Huntington Beach) was active in YAF in his youth. He told Klatch that "[t]he two things that eventually split the youth of the right wing were the draft and legalization of marijuana. Those two issues were central issues . . . Milton Friedman, who was the conservative guru . . . [was] in favor of marijuana being legal and . . . not in favor of the draft . . . It's consistent with his free enterprise philosophy. Well, the libertarians started evolving into that and pretty soon you got into a situation where on the fundamental issues of the day . . . the libertarians were more in tune with what the left was advocating than [with what] . . . the conservatives were advocating." Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 34, 156-157.

239 Murray N. Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* (New York: Collier, 1978 [1973]), p. 46.

Some libertarians, then as now, did *not* think of the State as a criminal band, however. These “minarchists,” or “limited government libertarians,” believed with Ayn Rand that “[t]he proper functions of a government fall into three broad categories [...]: *the police*, to protect men from criminals—*the armed services*, to protect men from foreign invaders—*the law courts*, to settle disputes among men [...].”²⁴⁰ Clearly, then, they would have been no more likely than the anarchists to support the Progressives’ calls for old age pensions or workplace safety regulations or “improved” schools and parks. Nor would they have been likely to accept the New Left’s commitment to forced integration of privately owned businesses. So far as Rand and the other minarchists were concerned, the only true “crimes” were murder, rape, other types of assault, theft, and fraud. Refusing to associate with someone, even for a stupid or reprehensible reason, should not, in their eyes, be regarded as a criminal offense.

Still, despite their differences, there is an important common denominator linking these three political ideologies—progressivism, new leftism, and libertarianism. They are all on the Left.

This claim will seem surprising to many. Most people today, if they know about libertarianism at all, tend to think of it, along with conservatism, as part of the Right. In the September 2005 issue of *Harper’s*, for example, editor Lewis Lapham referred to “the several armies of the imperial right—conservative and neoconservative, libertarian and evangelical.”²⁴¹ Libertarians themselves tend to see the matter in this way. Yet a brief look at the history of the relevant political terms—*Left* and *Right*, *liberal* and *conservative*—will persuade us that libertarianism has absolutely nothing in common with anything on the Right. For it is as the anarchist Murray Bookchin said back in 1978: “People who resist authority, who defend the rights of the individual, who try in a period of increasing totalitarianism and centralization to reclaim these rights—this is the true left in the United States. Whether they are anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, or libertarians who believe in free enterprise, I regard theirs as the real legacy of the left [...].” And what about the socialists, the Maoists and Trotskyites, and the liberals of the Democratic party? Bookchin was asked. What about the people most Americans regarded as “the Left”? Those people, Bookchin replied, were “going toward authoritarianism, toward totalitarianism.” They were “becoming the real right in the United States.”²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: World, 1964), p. 151.

²⁴¹ Lewis H. Lapham, “Civil Obedience.” *Harper’s* September 2005: 7.

²⁴² Jeff Rigenbach, “Reason Interview: Murray Bookchin.” *Reason* October 1979, p. 36.

Bookchin was referring here to a conception of Western political history in which, as Karl Hess had put it a few years earlier, on “the far right [...] we find monarchy, absolute dictatorships, and other forms of absolutely authoritarian rule,” while the Left “opposes the concentration of power and wealth and, instead, advocates and works toward the distribution of power into the maximum number of hands.” Just as the farthest Right you can go is absolute dictatorship, Hess argued, so “[t]he farthest left you can go, historically at any rate, is anarchism—the total opposition to *any* institutionalized power, a state of completely voluntary social organization [...].”²⁴³

To understand this perspective on Western politics, we must look back to the time, more than 250 years ago, when the terms *Left* and *Right*, *liberal* and *conservative*, first came into general usage. In the beginning, Murray Rothbard tells us,

there was the old order, the *ancien régime*, the regime of caste and frozen status, of exploitation by a despotic ruling class, using the church to dupe the masses into accepting its rule. This was pure statism; this was the right wing. Then, in 17th and 18th century western Europe, a liberal and radical opposition movement arose [...] a popular revolutionary movement on behalf of rationalism, individual liberty, minimal government, free markets, international peace and separation of church and state, in opposition to throne and altar, to monarchy, the ruling class, theocracy and war. These [people] were the left [...].²⁴⁴

Don Lavoie, writing nearly two decades later, in the mid 1980s, came to much the same conclusion. He wrote of “numerous popular revolts against the society of empire, feudalism, mercantilism, and privilege on behalf of principles of natural law or justice, from which none, not even kings and popes, are exempt,” and continued:

Some of the earliest to formulate these vague principles into more specific shape were the Levellers of the English Civil War (1642–1647), the radical liberals during the French Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, and the American revolutionaries. Here was the original Left, the radicalism that opposed government power not by merely putting forth a set of reforms for the state to implement but by insisting on a set of rules—or natural laws, as they called them—by which all human beings, including those in

²⁴³ Karl Hess, *Dear America* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), pp. 10–11, 12.

²⁴⁴ Murray N. Rothbard, “Confessions of a Right-Wing Liberal.” *Ramparts*, VI, 4, June 15, 1968. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard77.html>

positions of power, are to be equally limited in order that they be equally free.²⁴⁵

These people, the ones doing all the formulating and insisting, the ones who made up “the original Left,” were known at the time as “liberals.” Their doctrine, an outgrowth of the 18th Century Enlightenment (English and Scottish as well as French), was called “liberalism.” “Liberalism,” Rothbard says, was “the party of hope, of radicalism, of liberty, of the Industrial Revolution, of progress, of humanity; the other was Conservatism, the party of reaction, the party that longed to restore the hierarchy, statism, theocracy, serfdom, and class exploitation of the old order.” It wasn’t long before “[p]olitical ideologies were polarized, with Liberalism on the extreme ‘Left,’ and Conservatism on the extreme ‘Right,’ of the ideological spectrum.”²⁴⁶

The liberals (and the proto-liberals who preceded them) managed to achieve “at least partial victories for individual liberty, laissez-faire, separation of church and state, and international peace,” Rothbard contends, through “a series of cataclysmic revolutions [...] the English Revolutions of the seventeenth century, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution [...]”²⁴⁷ The last two of these revolutions, which took place only about a decade apart, were intimately interrelated. French thinkers, most notably Montesquieu, had loomed large among the important intellectual influences on the American revolutionaries. A French liberal, the Marquis de Lafayette, had personally assisted the Americans with the difficult task of achieving a final military victory over the British. And once that victory was achieved, yet another French liberal, Alexis de Toqueville, exclaimed exuberantly that “[t]he Americans seemed only to be putting into practice ideas which had been sponsored by our writers, and to be making our dreams their realities.”²⁴⁸

Having done so, the Americans repaid the favor by cross-fertilizing the French Revolution a few years later. As Will and Ariel Durant remind us, “[t]he Declaration of Rights issued by the Virginia constitutional convention on June 12, 1776, and the Bill of Rights added to the American Constitution, became part models for the Declaration of the

245 Don Lavoie, *National Economic Planning: What Is Left?* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1985), p. 215.

246 Murray N. Rothbard, *Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty* (San Francisco: Cato Institute, 1979 [1965]), p. 7.

247 Ibid.

248 Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. Tr. Stuart Gilbert. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978 [1856]).

Rights of Man promulgated by the French Constituent Assembly on August 26, 1789.”²⁴⁹ Nor was this all: one of the chief American revolutionaries, the pamphleteer Thomas Paine, was also one of the chief French revolutionaries—and, for a time, a member of one of the several revolutionary governments.

As professor Owen Connelly of the University of South Carolina notes, in his widely used textbook *French Revolution/Napoleonic Era*, “[t]he Revolution proper (1789-1799) saw an incredible succession of governments—absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy (in various forms), representative republic, authoritarian republic, bourgeois republic [...]”²⁵⁰ And it was within one of those revolutionary governments, in the Legislative Assembly in the fall of 1791, that the terms *Right* and *Left* were first used in a political sense. As the Durants tell it, when the assembly convened, the “substantial minority dedicated to preserving the monarchy [...] occupied the right section of the hall, and thereby gave a name to conservatives everywhere.” The liberals “sat at the left on an elevated section called the Mountain; soon they were named Montagnards. In the center sat 355 delegates who refused to be labeled [...]”²⁵¹

Though the American and French revolutions had much in common, they also differed in important respects. They differed, for example, with regard to the precise character of the liberalism that dominated each of the two struggles. The famous slogan of the French revolution—Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!—holds the key to this important difference. The idea of equality figured in the American Revolution as well, of course—didn’t Thomas Jefferson write in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal”? But to Jefferson and the other American liberals, “equality” meant equality of rights, equality before the law. In France, by contrast, to more than a few of the revolutionaries, it meant much, much more than that. In the eyes of these French liberals, it was, as Ludwig von Mises summarized their view more than a hundred years later,

not enough to make men equal before the law. In order to make them really equal, one must also allot them the same income. It is not enough to abolish privileges of birth and of rank. One must finish

249 Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *Rousseau and Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), p. 872.

250 Owen Connelly, *French Revolution/Napoleonic Era* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 2.

251 Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Napoleon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), p. 34.

the job and do away with the greatest and most important privilege of all, namely, that which is accorded by private property. Only then will the liberal program be completely realized, and a consistent liberalism thus leads ultimately to socialism, to the abolition of private ownership of the means of production.²⁵²

According to the Progressive Historian Vernon Louis Parrington, whose *Main Currents in American Thought* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1928, John Adams spoke for many American revolutionary leaders and activists when he criticized French revolutionists for preaching “equality of persons and property.”²⁵³ For, as Connelly notes, the concepts of liberty and equality, when *equality* is taken to mean equality of income or equality of property, are “contradictory.” This kind of equality “had to be imposed by force by the central government,” and it wasn’t long before “[t]he advocates of greater equality became the proponents of greater central power.”²⁵⁴ Need it be added that “greater central power” is precisely the opposite of everything the liberals had long been fighting for and eagerly anticipating?

Lavoie tells the instructive story of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), a French liberal who came “gradually to reject the ideal of discovering rules for the equal protection of liberty, substituting in the last eleven years of his life the alternative ideal of setting up an elite for the rational control of society.” By 1814, Saint-Simon had become a fervent admirer of feudal and other medieval organizational structures and an enthusiastic student of the principles of military organization as exemplified by Napoleon Bonaparte. He called for “a hierarchical administration of the whole of society’s resources under the direction of the ‘captains of industry,’ among whom bankers are prominently included.”²⁵⁵ Scientists and social engineers were also to play a major role in the planning of Saint-Simon’s utopian dream.

According to Lavoie, “Saint-Simon was not a democrat” in his later years; in fact, he “had little but contempt for ‘the masses’ and explicitly recommended that those who refused to cooperate with the visions of the ruling intelligentsia be ‘treated like cattle’ [...]” All in all, Lavoie concludes, Saint-Simon had “definite authoritarian leanings.” But this is

252 Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: In the Classical Tradition* (San Francisco: Cobden Press, 1985), p. 29.

253 Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), p. 324

254 Connelly, op.cit., p. 3.

255 Lavoie, op.cit., pp. 16, 17.

putting it mildly. For not only did Saint-Simon advocate what amounted to a return to the despotism of pre-liberal times, he also advocated what amounted to a return to the essentially mercantilist economic policies of pre-liberal States. Mercantilism, according to political scientist David Osterfeld, is “a system in which the operation of the market is impeded by extensive government restrictions for the benefit of the ruling group.”²⁵⁶ Another name for this kind of arrangement is *state capitalism*. Yet another is *corporatism* (or, alternatively, *corporativism*). Still another, if a fervent nationalism is added to the mixture, is *fascism*. How could people who thought of themselves as liberals, men (and women) of the Left, embrace such heresy?

According to Lavoie, the answer is to be found in an understanding of the role played in the liberal movement late in the 18th Century and early in the 19th Century by the ideal of equality. Under the influence of apostates like Saint-Simon, a good many liberals came to believe “that a planning bureau could rationally and democratically control the cultural and economic development of society for the benefit of all”; as a result, “the ambition of the Left came to be not just the complete equality of rights, as important as that was still thought to be, but the more grandiose ideal of equality of wealth.”²⁵⁷

The liberals who became ensnared by this vision of a totally egalitarian society adopted socialism as their new ideal. It is customary today to regard socialism as the polar opposite of the doctrine of individual liberty and free trade, but in fact, as Rothbard notes, this is not the case. It is “conservatism,” he writes, that

was always the polar opposite of classical liberalism. Socialism, in contrast, was not the polar opposite of either, but rather, in my view, a muddled and irrationally contradictory mixture of both liberalism and conservatism. For socialism was essentially a movement to come to terms with the industrial revolution, to try to achieve *liberal ends* by the use of collectivistic, *conservative means*.²⁵⁸

In a later essay, Rothbard expanded upon this insight. “Socialism,” he wrote, like Liberalism and against Conservatism, accepted the industrial system and the liberal goals of freedom, reason, mobility, progress,

256 David Osterfeld, “Marxism, Capitalism and Mercantilism.” (1991) *Review of Austrian Economics*, 5(1) pp. 107-116. Online at http://www.mises.org/journals/rae/pdf/rae5_1_5.pdf

257 Lavoie, op.cit., p. 218.

258 Murray N. Rothbard, “The Transformation of the American Right.” 1964. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard13.html>

higher living standards for the masses, and an end to theocracy and war; but it tried to achieve these ends by the use of incompatible, Conservative means: statism, central planning, communitarianism, etc. Or rather, to be more precise, there were from the beginning two different strands within Socialism: one was the Right-wing, authoritarian strand, from Saint-Simon down, which glorified statism, hierarchy, and collectivism and which was thus a projection of Conservatism trying to accept and dominate the new industrial civilization. The other was the Left-wing, relatively libertarian strand, exemplified in their different ways by Marx and Bakunin, revolutionary and far more interested in achieving the libertarian goals of liberalism and socialism: but especially the smashing of the State apparatus to achieve the “withering away of the State” and the “end of the exploitation of man by man.”²⁵⁹

II

The Decline of American Liberalism—the Early Years

The socialist apostasy, however partial, proved more popular in Europe than in America—at first. At first, American liberals hewed closely enough to their individualist values to shake off any temptation they might have felt to adopt the socialist line. Still, as the late Arthur Ekirch contends in his classic work *The Decline of American Liberalism*,

[s]ince the time of the American Revolution, the major trend in our history has been in the direction of an ever-greater centralization and concentration of control—politically, economically, and socially. As a part of this drift toward “state capitalism” or “socialism,” the liberal values associated with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—and especially that of individual freedom—have slowly lost their primary importance in American life and thought.

“The American Revolution was liberal,” Ekirch maintains, though this claim, even on his own terms, is debatable. As he himself notes, later in the same book, “any war, even one fought over some great moral principle, involves the use of methods essentially illiberal; [...] the very substance of liberalism [...] is bound to suffer in wartime.” And “this in-

²⁵⁹ Rothbard, *Left and Right*, op. cit.. p. 11.

compatibility of war and liberalism” was certainly on display during the American Revolution, most notably in the treatment peaceable loyalists received at the hands of the revolutionaries and their supporters.²⁶⁰

Consider Kenneth Roberts’s portrayal of the loyalist plight, in his 1940 novel of the revolution, *Oliver Wiswell*: “They had been harried, spied on, lied about, informed against, robbed and insulted; and they longed achingly for [British General William] Howe and his army, so that they might be freed from the oppressions and the restrictions of Congress, mobs, and committees.” One Long Island loyalist tells Roberts’s title character:

“This island is three-quarters Loyalist; but we can’t do the things the rebels do. They send in militia from other colonies, or bring their mobs from New York. They have no homes here; no families; no belongings except what they have on their backs. We have! If we fight ’em, they seize our cattle, burn our barns and houses, and drive our families across the Sound. I can name hundreds of people, right in this neighborhood, who’ve been up to their necks in misery and ruin for over a year, just because they were known to be against rebellion.”²⁶¹

It would appear, then, that at least some of the “liberals” involved in the American Revolution were themselves disinclined to respect the natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of those who disagreed with the aims of the revolution. Nevertheless, as Ekirch notes, the revolutionaries’ ideological leaders apparently “were not prepared for the conservative countermovement and nationalistic consolidation that followed the war.”²⁶²

Thomas Jefferson, for example, believed, with virtually all liberals, that “[e]conomic paternalism in behalf of certain privileged groups was [...] the main source of the tyranny and political corruption that he saw in Europe. It was such a set of evils that American liberals desired, at all costs, to avoid.” And yet, “the war itself had helped to breed a new aristocracy of talents and wealth eager to avail itself of the privileges lost by the departing loyalist upper class.” The exigencies of “army contracting and supply” during the war assured that “[m]anufacturing increased” and that “business [...] began to look to the government for economic

260 Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., *The Decline of American Liberalism* (New York: Longmans, 1955), pp. ix, 33, 116.

261 Kenneth Roberts, *The Kenneth Roberts Reader* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1945), pp. 182–183, 185.

262 Ekirch, op.cit., p. 36.

support." Little wonder, then, that "[a]fter the return of peace [...] the new generation of businessmen should strive to enlist the aid of the government in preserving and increasing their wartime gains." Unfortunately, from their point of view, "the government" under the Articles of Confederation was a relatively feeble thing, not even empowered to "levy uniform tariffs" to prop up the profits and the competitive position of the firms founded and run by these new businessmen.²⁶³

And so it was that in May of 1787, "fifty-five [...] men of considerable and varied property holdings, ranging from the possession of slaves and lands to investments in government securities and far-flung business enterprises" met in Philadelphia and "resolved to disregard the announced plan of submitting amendments" to strengthen the Articles of Confederation; instead, they decided "to prepare [...] an entirely new frame of government." Unsurprisingly, this "new frame," the U.S. Constitution of 1787, gave a new central government

broad and far-reaching powers over the economic life of the nation. [...] Congress was given exclusive authority to coin money and to regulate both foreign and interstate commerce. Thus the stage was set for the abandonment of laissez-faire liberalism and the substitution of a policy of economic nationalism or government paternalism.

At another point, Ekirch makes the same argument in a somewhat more measured way, contending that the Constitution provided, not an actual policy of paternalism, but merely "a skeleton for the further development of a strong paternalistic state." Still, the very first political party to control the machinery of government in the United States under the new Constitution, the Federalist party, was only too happy to do whatever it could to make such a paternalistic state a reality. Alexander Hamilton, whom Ekirch calls "easily the most significant" of the Federalist leaders and a firm believer "in the virtues of a strong rather than a weak government," was "[u]nhampered by intellectual loyalty to radical or Revolutionary principles," and was bent on seeing "his program of economic nationalism" imposed on the new nation.²⁶⁴

Hamilton's program called for a national bank which, after having "received a monopoly of government business," would "provide new capital for the business expansion that Hamilton deemed vital to United States prosperity," that business expansion to be protected from foreign competition by a high tariff wall. Hamilton—need it be said?—was the first great conservative in American politics. His

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40, 40-41.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43, 44, 45-46.

party, the Federalist party, was the first conservative party, the first Right-wing party, in American political history. As Ekirch reminds us, “the Federalists [...] pursued a constantly illiberal course during their twelve years of power.”²⁶⁵

They were not without opposition, of course. As Ekirch notes, even before that twelve-year period began, “conservatives were everywhere taking fright over the possibility of a resurgence of the old Revolutionary spirit of radicalism among the lower classes. Debtor farmers, propertyless mechanics, and discontented ex-soldiers [...] were beginning to unite in their opposition to strong government and higher taxes.”²⁶⁶ In 1786, as Gore Vidal tells the tale—not in one of his novels, but in an essay on American history in the *New York Review of Books*—a number of “Massachusetts veterans of the revolution [had] joined Captain Daniel Shays in his resistance to the landed gentry’s” new “tax-levying central government,” namely, the post-war government of Massachusetts. “The veterans thought that they had been fighting a war for true independence,” says Vidal. “They did not want London to be replaced by New York,” as more than a few of the conservatives in Boston had begun to propose be done, in order to safeguard against exactly such insurrections as Shays’s rebellion.

“Their rebellion was promptly put down,” Vidal writes.

But so shaken was the elite by the experience that their most important (and wealthiest) figure grimly emerged from private life with a letter to Harry Lee. “You talk of employing influence,” wrote George Washington, “to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts. I know not where that influence is to be found, or if attainable, that it would be a proper remedy for the disorders. *Influence is no government.* Let us have one by which our lives, liberties and properties will be secured or let us know the worst at once.” So was born [...] the Constitution of the United States.²⁶⁷

Once that constitution was in place, however, with Washington duly installed in the presidency and Hamilton duly installed in the Treasury Department, the protests continued. The cost of imposing Hamilton’s “program of economic nationalism” on the new nation “required a revenue beyond the amount that could be collected from the moderate tariff duties approved by the First Congress,” Arthur Ekirch explains.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 46–47, 53.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁶⁷ Gore Vidal, “Homage to Daniel Shays,” in *Homage to Daniel Shays: Collected Essays, 1952–1972* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 443.

The Secretary of the Treasury therefore suggested that Congress place an excise tax on whisky. Such a tax would hit the small farmers of the back country who had opposed the adoption of the Constitution and who remained dubious of the Federalist program, but it would avoid giving offense to the men of wealth and property whose support Hamilton deemed necessary to the success of the new national government. Distilling in the 1790s was a small-scale enterprise carried on chiefly by Westerners who were thereby able to change their bulky grain products into a form more easily transportable across the mountains to eastern markets. The tax, though small in monetary value—originally from nine to twenty-five cents a gallon—struck at the heart of the prosperity and manner of living of the frontier farmers and resulted finally in the summer of 1794 in full-scale, violent resistance in the western counties of Pennsylvania.²⁶⁸

This state of affairs was unacceptable to the Federalists, to say the very least. “For Washington,” writes Vidal, in his recent book *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson*, “this Whiskey Rebellion was Shays’s rebellion all over again. He must now, like Hotspur, summon his troops.”²⁶⁹ Accordingly,

[t]he father of his nation drew his sword, ascended the throne and commanded the nation to forthwith provide him with twelve thousand men to put down the rebellion. Americans finally came to their senses. More than twelve thousand men rallied around Washington, who, with Hamilton at his side, rode straight to the heart of the rebellion in western Pennsylvania where twenty no doubt deeply embarrassed moonshiners surrendered; recanted; and received a presidential pardon. Hamilton, now a general, headed back to New York to prepare for the election of 1796.²⁷⁰

Rothbard calls the Whiskey Rebellion “a non-violent, civil disobedient refusal to pay” a “hated tax.” According to Rothbard, “the average American” of the time considered “the federal government’s assumption of the power to impose excise taxes” very questionable indeed and “not [...] very different from the levies of the British crown.” The tax was also resented, and with special ill will, by small distillers. For “in keeping with Hamilton’s program, the tax bore more heavily on the smaller distilleries.” In fact, “many large distilleries supported the tax as a means of crippling their smaller and more numerous competitors.”

²⁶⁸ Ekirch, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

²⁶⁹ Gore Vidal, *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 105.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

And this is only the beginning of Rothbard's dissent from what he calls "the Official View" of the Whiskey Rebellion. For

[t]he main distortion of the Official View of the Whiskey Rebellion was its alleged confinement to four counties of western Pennsylvania. From recent research, we now know that *no one* paid the tax on whiskey throughout the American "back-country": that is, the frontier areas of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and the entire state of Kentucky.

The fact is, Rothbard claims, that

President Washington and Secretary Hamilton chose to make a fuss about Western Pennsylvania precisely because in that region there was cadre of wealthy officials who were willing to collect taxes. Such a cadre did not even exist in the other areas of the American frontier; there was no fuss or violence against tax collectors in Kentucky and the rest of the back-country because there was no one willing to be a tax collector.

In point of fact, according to Rothbard's account, even if there had been willing tax collectors, "[n]o local juries could be found to convict tax delinquents" in almost "[t]he entire American back-country."²⁷¹

Not only did the Federalists work to impose Hamiltonianism to the best of their ability, "adopting a broad and elastic interpretation of the Constitution and using expanded powers of government and the vague concept of the general welfare for the benefit of a particular class—the commercial, propertied aristocracy," as Ekirch puts it; they also wrote, adopted, and enforced the notorious Sedition Act of 1798, which provided that

"if any person shall write, print, utter, or publish" or cause or aid anyone else to write or publish "any false scandalous and malicious writing" against the government, Congress, or President of the United States "with intent to defame" or "to stir up sedition," he should be punished by a fine not exceeding two thousand dollars and imprisonment not exceeding two years.²⁷²

So much for the liberal belief (codified in the First Amendment to the Constitution) in freedom of speech and expression! To impose criminal penalties for speech against government policies was to return to the oppressive practices of the *ancien régime* against which the liberals had led a rebellion only a few years before.

271 Murray N. Rothbard, "The Whiskey Rebellion." *The Free Market*, September 1994. Online at: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard1.html>

272 Ekirch, op.cit., pp. 54, 51.

III

Conservative Republicans and Liberal Democrats in 19th Century America

If the Federalists were the first American conservatives, the Jeffersonians were the first American liberals.²⁷³ As Ekirch observes, “Better than any other single document, the Declaration of Independence stated the liberal political philosophy on which the ideology of the Revolution was based.” Thus, as author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson had better claim than most other leaders of the rebellion to be considered the ideal American spokesman for liberalism. Of the remaining Founding Fathers, only Thomas Paine could rival him for that position of honor. Yet, as Ekirch notes with sorrow, neither the Federalists nor the Jeffersonians “was able to preserve a consistent liberal approach” to public policy. On balance, however, he argues, “the Jeffersonian Antifederalists adhered more closely to traditional liberal tenets.”²⁷⁴ Vidal dissents from this view of the situation. “In 1800,” he writes, “the Hamiltonian view was rejected by the people and their new President Thomas Jefferson. Four years later, the Hamiltonian view had prevailed and was endorsed by the reelected Jefferson. ‘We are all Hamiltonians now!’ he might have exclaimed had he had the grace of the Thirty-Seventh President.”²⁷⁵

In his first inaugural address, Vidal points out, Jefferson called for “a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuit of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government...” “In other words,” Vidal says, “no taxes beyond a minimal levy in order to pay for a few judges, a postal service, small executive and legislative bodies.” In other words, the policy prescription of a classical liberal.

273 Actually, of course, many of the Federalists were liberals, too. George Washington was a liberal. So was John Adams. They were, however, as Ekirch puts it, “liberals of a more conservative persuasion,” (p. 27) and they adapted much too readily to the entirely illiberal—the entirely *conservative*—ideas of certain of their fellow Federalists.

274 Ekirch, *op.cit.*, pp. 29, 44.

275 Vidal, “Homage to Daniel Shays,” *op.cit.*, p. 435. The reference to “the Thirty-Seventh President” is, of course, a reference to Richard M. Nixon, who famously justified his adoption of wage and price controls by declaring that “We are all Keynesians now.”

In his second inaugural address, as Vidal tells the story, Jefferson changed his tune considerably. Now he called for federal expenditures for “rivers, canals, roads, arts, manufactures, education, and other great objects within each State.” Very Hamiltonian, no? And where Hamilton had advocated creation of a U.S. “military force capable of making itself felt in world politics,” the Jefferson of the second inaugural address acknowledged that “injustice, by ourselves or others, must sometimes produce war.” As Vidal comments,

[t]he idea of the rich empty continent best exploited by men unbugged by a central government had now been succeeded by the notion that government ought to pitch in and help with those roads and schools, but of course that’s going to take money, so taxes must be raised to pay for these good things which benefit us all equally, don’t they?²⁷⁶

The twelve years of Federalist rule—the Washington and Adams administrations—were followed by *forty* years of rule by Jefferson’s party, the Democratic-Republicans, later the Democrats. Not a few were born, grew to maturity, and produced children of their own without ever knowing of a president or vice president who represented a different party. By the time the Democrats finally fell from power in the election of 1840, their opposition, the Federalists, had long since withered away and died.

They were replaced by the Whigs, a new conservative party that began life as a faction within the Democratic-Republicans. The Whigs were “liberals of a more conservative persuasion” with a vengeance; they favored what their most influential man on Capitol Hill, Henry Clay, called, with rare prescience, the “American system”—a package of policies that included “a national bank, protective tariff, internal improvements, and generous land policy,” an updated version, according to Ekirch, of “the old Hamiltonian economic program in order to give it a greater mass appeal.”²⁷⁷ The Whigs managed to win the elections of 1840 and 1848, but both presidents they elected died within their first year in office, and their terms were filled out by their lesser-known and generally undistinguished vice presidents. By 1856, the Whigs had ceased to exist, following the Federalists into oblivion.

They were replaced by the Republicans, who fielded their first candidate for the presidency in 1856 and won their first presidential election with their second candidate, Abraham Lincoln, in 1860. As the Whigs were merely the Federalists dressed up in more modern clothing, so the Republicans were merely the Whigs with an anti-slavery veneer. Meet

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p.436.

²⁷⁷ Ekirch, op.cit., p. 71.

the new opposition party, same as the old opposition party. As University of South Carolina historian Clyde Wilson puts it,

Apparently millions continue to harbor the strange delusion that the Republican party is the party of free enterprise [...]. In fact, the party is and always has been the party of state capitalism. That, along with the powers and perks it provides its leaders, is the whole reason for its creation and continued existence. By state capitalism I mean a regime of highly concentrated private ownership, subsidized and protected by government. The Republican party has never, ever opposed any government interference in the free market or any government expenditure except those that might favour labour unions or threaten Big Business.

As Wilson tells it, “[t]he very name of the Republican party is a lie. The name was chosen when the party formed in the 1850s to suggest a likeness to the Jeffersonian Republicans of earlier history. This had a very slender plausibility.” The first problem was that “the Northern Republicans were totally committed to a mercantilist agenda, every plank of which Jeffersonians had defined themselves by being against. The Republicans of the 1850s exactly represented those parts of the country and those interests that had been the most rabid opponents of Jefferson and his Republicans.” What the new Northern Republicans were offering was really nothing more than a repeat of “the Whig program—raising the tariff up again, re-establishing the national bank, and distributing lavishly from the treasury to companies that promised to build infrastructure.” And

[a]s for the glory of emancipation that so long lent righteousness to their war, as Frederick Douglas pointed out, Lincoln’s party was pre-eminently the party of white men. Before, during, and after the war the Republicans never did anything with a primary motive of the welfare of the black people. The black people were for use for higher purposes, for keeping down the South and keeping the Republicans in power. Most importantly, they were to stay in the South. Millions of acres of vacant western land could be given away to corporations who could provide the representatives of the people with the proper cash incentives, but there was not a patch for the freedmen.²⁷⁸

Quite aside from the Republicans’ reasons for prosecuting the war and freeing the slaves, however, the fact remains that to prosecute the war at all constituted pursuit of an illiberal policy. For, as Ekirch reminds us,

²⁷⁸ Clyde Wilson, “The Republican Charade: Lincoln and His Party.” 7 September 2005. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/wilson/wilson20.html>

any war, even one fought over some great moral principle, involves the use of methods essentially illiberal; for the very substance of liberalism—its emphasis on reason, on toleration and respect for individual and minority rights, and on progress by evolution instead of revolution—is bound to suffer in wartime. But this incompatibility of war and liberalism becomes even more true in the case of a vast internal conflict such as the American Civil War.²⁷⁹

The Civil War, Ekirch writes, “resulted in [...] widespread violation of fundamental civil liberties,” for, “although neither Lincoln nor Jefferson Davis aspired to become a dictator in the twentieth-century sense of the term, before the close of their long struggle the governments of both the North and the South verged closely upon military despotisms.” During the war, “[t]he Anglo-Saxon heritage, which emphasized the rule of law and held the military in strict subserviency to the civil power, was challenged by the argument that the Constitution no longer operated and that ‘military necessity knows no law.’” Partisans of this latter “argument”—i.e., the Republicans of the time—authorised “arbitrary arrests” and had

persons [...] seized and confined on the *suspicion* of disloyalty or of sympathy with the southern cause. Thus, in the course of the Civil War, a total of thirteen thousand civilians was estimated to have been held as political prisoners, often without any sort of trial or after only cursory hearings before a military tribunal.²⁸⁰

Nor was this all. “The arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of civilians by the military and executive departments of the government,” Ekirch maintains,

was the chief violation of civil liberties during the Civil War, but the rights of individuals were also invaded in other ways. In the South, the Northern Confiscation Acts resulted in the seizure of private property on the ground that it was being used to aid the cause of the Confederacy. Thus, for the first time in modern history, war was officially waged against individual citizens, an illiberal tactic destined to become a commonplace of total warfare.

Then there were the “teachers dismissed or [...] forced to resign for alleged disloyalty or because of a lack of what was deemed a proper enthusiasm for the northern cause.” There was also “military conscription, put into practice on a large scale for the first time in American history during the Civil War.” This disgracefully anti-liberal measure, Ekirch

²⁷⁹ Ekirch, *op.cit.*, p. 116.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124, 124-125. [emphasis added]

writes, “affected virtually every American household” and was “significant in encouraging the idea that the rights of the individual should be subordinated to the needs of the state.”²⁸¹

Rothbard agrees with Clyde Wilson’s contention that the GOP was never a liberal party. “The classical liberal party throughout the nineteenth century was not the Republican, but the Democratic party,” he wrote in 1980, “which fought for minimal government, free trade, and no special privileges for business.”²⁸² Steven R. Weisman of *The New York Times* sees much the same thing when he examines the historical record for the mid-19th Century. In his 2002 book *The Great Tax Wars: Lincoln to Wilson—The Fierce Battles over Money and Power That Transformed the Nation*, Weisman writes that under Lincoln and the Republican party “the North’s economy rested on a kind of state capitalism of trade barriers, government-sponsored railroads, coddling of trusts, suppression of labor and public investment in canals, roads and other infrastructures.” It was “the Democratic Party,” he points out, that rose “to define itself as the main challenger” to this perpetuation of Clay’s “American system.”²⁸³

The libertarian historian Thomas J. DiLorenzo, in a recent online discussion of Weisman’s book, commented that Clay was “Abraham Lincoln’s political idol. Lincoln devoted his entire involvement in politics prior to becoming president to pursuing this agenda first as a Whig, then as a Republican. He became the Republican Party nominee precisely because of his long record as a ‘state capitalist’ or mercantilist [...]”²⁸⁴ After Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, the Republican party held the White House for almost the entirety of the next half century and consistently pursued its Hamiltonian, Clayesque economic policies throughout that period. Republicans were only ousted from the presidency twice between 1865 and 1913, both times—in 1884 and again in 1892—by Democrat Grover Cleveland.

It is instructive to examine those two Cleveland administrations and contrast Cleveland’s policies with those of his Republican rivals. The Republican nominee in 1884 was James G. Blaine, a former news-

281 Ibid., pp. 125-126, 126-127.

282 Murray N. Rothbard, “Requiem for the Old Right.” *Inquiry* 27 October 1980: 24-27. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard46.html>

283 Steven R. Weisman, *The Great Tax Wars: Lincoln to Wilson—The Fierce Battles over Money and Power That Transformed the Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 53.

284 Thomas J. DiLorenzo, “More Trouble for the Lincoln Cartel.” 7 September 2004. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/dilorenzo/dilorenzo078.html>

paperman who had entered Congress during the Civil War and served as Speaker of the House during the two notoriously corrupt Grant administrations. Blaine was widely suspected of corruption himself; specifically he was suspected of pocketing substantial sums as a direct result of his highly successful efforts to secure lucrative federal land grants for various railroads. Cleveland, a former mayor of Buffalo and governor of New York, had made his reputation as an opponent of government corruption and special favors to big businesses, including tariffs. The electorate responded to his image as a man of “honesty and courage” and made him the first Democratic president since James Buchanan left the White House in 1861. Once in office, Cleveland not only worked to abolish tariffs; also, “[s]eeking to restrain governmental expansion, he vetoed over two-thirds of the bills passed by Congress, more than all his predecessors combined.”²⁸⁵

In 1888, Cleveland narrowly lost his bid for re-election. As Gregory Dehler notes, “Benjamin Harrison [emerged as the] victor of the 1888 election, although he had a minority in the popular vote [...]” Determined not to have to win another election in such fashion, Harrison

worked with Republican Speaker of the House Thomas Reed of Maine to craft a new majority. Reed adopted strict rules in the House that earned him the nickname, “the czar” and gave him the power to get legislation through with lightning speed. The result was the “Billion Dollar Congress.” Lacking imagination and devoid of luck, the Republican majority in 1890 simply tried to buy their way to a new majority. A surplus created by the protectionist policies they avowed had come to be viewed by the public and pundits alike as a dangerous hoarding of money in the deflationary economy. Since the Republicans did not want to lose the protective nature of their tariff, they turned to the next best way of getting rid of the money; they spent it.

Dehler presents several examples of the GOP-controlled Billion Dollar Congress’s expenditures. Among them was a nearly fifty percent increase in federal spending on benefits for veterans of the Civil War. As Dehler reminds us, this was already the largest category of “social spending” by the federal government at that time. The big increase in such spending that the Billion Dollar Congress pushed through was designed

to include parents, widows, and children of veterans as eligible recipients for pensions. Next they tried to buy off the West and

²⁸⁵ R. Hal Williams, “Grover Cleveland,” in Paul S. Boyer, ed., *Oxford Companion to United States History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2001).

the Mountain states by enacting the Sherman Silver Purchase Act which required the federal government to purchase almost the entire output of the nation's silver mines. Reformers were wooed with the Sherman Anti-Trust Act designed to break up large business concentrations.²⁸⁶

But doesn't this last item in Dehler's list introduce a kind of flaw into the larger picture I've been trying to coax into emergence? Didn't I argue only a few pages ago that the Republican party has always been a consistent *champion* of big business? How, then, am I to account for Republican support for antitrust legislation? The New Left historian Gabriel Kolko posed this question to himself back in the 1960s and published his answer in his remarkable and influential book, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (1963).

The Sherman Antitrust Act, Kolko points out, was "vague and subject to broad interpretation." It never even attempted "a legal definition of monopoly power," relying instead on the common law understanding of that concept, "which was as vague and multidimensional as the last lawyer's interpretation." Such a law could be used against virtually any commercial combination and would thus be most likely to affect those with the least political power. "Despite Sherman's disclaimer that the law would not be applied to trade unions or farmer organizations," Kolko writes, "many of his colleagues in the Senate predicted that 'It would be a weapon in the hands of the rich against the poor,' and they anticipated the law's subsequent use against unions."²⁸⁷

In any case, businessmen, both large and small, were far from averse to the idea of government regulation of their enterprises. As Kolko puts it, "the dominant tendency in the American economy at the beginning of this [the 20th] century was toward growing competition." Furthermore, "contrary to the consensus of historians, it was not the existence of monopoly that caused the federal government to intervene in the economy, but the lack of it."²⁸⁸ As Glenn Porter notes, "although big businesses [late in the 19th Century] were resistant to the effects of competition as it was known in earlier decades, they were not completely immune" and "if the corporate giants set prices extremely high and

286 Gregory J. Dehler, "Karl Rove's Inspired by McKinley—But It's Benjamin Harrison's Script He's Following." History News Network. Online at <http://hnn.us/articles/4576.html>

287 Kolko, *op.cit.*, pp. 61, 62.

288 *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.

reaped outrageously excessive profits, there was some chance that others would be tempted to enter the industry and compete.”²⁸⁹ The experience of the corporate giants in creating cartels and other voluntary cooperative systems with their competitors was that it was impossible to establish and sustain a profitable monopoly in the American economy—unless government could be induced to do it. So they thereupon set about building popular and political support for government action to create the monopolies they had sought but had been unable to achieve without the use of force.

It is worth noting that while most of the corporate giants had been unable to sustain profitability after growing to mammoth size, many smaller firms were prospering. According to Roy A. Childs, Jr., “economic forces indicated that centralization was inefficient and unstable. The push was towards decentralization, and smaller railroads often found themselves much less threatened by economic turns of events than the older, more established and larger business concerns.” “Overcentralization,” he notes, “inhibited [...] flexibility of action, and hence [...] ability to respond to changing market conditions.” Inevitably, then, the world of business came to be sharply divided along political lines. “The larger capitalists saw regulation as being in their interest, and competition as opposed to it; with the smaller businessmen, the situation was reversed.”²⁹⁰

This situation did not last long, however. What a difference twenty years could make! By the second decade of the 20th Century, the very same small businessmen who, back in 1890, had righteously expected their Republican representatives in Congress to rein in the giant industrial combinations they believed were gobbling up the market were singing a somewhat different tune. Now, Kolko writes, “the average small businessman wished to mitigate the effects of competition by what were essentially price, market, or output agreements [...]. He was, for all practical purposes, through with *laissez faire*, its costs, risks, and possible gains.”²⁹¹

In effect, then, Kolko’s answer to the question, “Why did Republicans support legislation to regulate the big business interests they supposedly represented?” is twofold. First, at least some of those big businessmen could see ways in which vaguely worded laws might be

289 Glenn Porter, *The Rise of Big Business, 1860-1910* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1973), pp. 96-97.

290 Childs, *op.cit.*, pp. 33, 39-40.

291 Kolko, *op.cit.*, p. 181.

used to their advantage. Second, small businessmen, believing their interests to be different from those of their larger competitors, supported the adoption of the Sherman Act. By the time they had changed their minds on this issue, Theodore Roosevelt was president and was happily engaged in doing the bidding of the newly united business community by plumping for modifications in the Sherman Act and creation of several new regulatory commissions and agencies to do the work previously entrusted to antitrust lawsuits.

The law should not be repealed, he declared in December, 1907, but "it should be so amended as to forbid only the kind of combination which does harm to the general public." Combinations were "reasonable or unreasonable," and the way to determine which should be allowed was to grant supervisory power to the federal government. Antitrust suits as a means of enforcing the law, Roosevelt declared, were "irksome" and prolonged affairs. Instead, the government should have the right to approve "reasonable agreements" between corporations, provided they were submitted for approval to an "appropriate" body. National incorporation of combinations, with heavy emphasis of the regular publication of key data and publicity, would allow the government to regulate the corporate structure to protect both shareholders and the public. Barring this, federal licensing for the same ends might be tried. And only the national government was capable of effective regulation of this magnitude. Regulation, not repression, was the theme. On the other hand, if there was any public figure of the day toward whom Roosevelt felt the greatest possible exasperation, that figure was "the unscrupulous businessman who did not recognize that moderate regulation could save him from a more drastic fate at the hands of the masses."²⁹²

Before Roosevelt could become president, however, his fellow Republican, William Mc Kinley, would have to serve four and a half years in the White House. And before that could happen, there would be another Democratic interlude, in which Grover Cleveland would devote himself for four more years to the task "of undoing the ill effects of the Billion Dollar Congress." Cleveland did manage to reduce the Republican tariffs, but not before they had played a part in plunging the nation into "the depression of 1893 to 1897, which sunk the Democrats."²⁹³

²⁹² Ibid., pp. 128, 130.

²⁹³ Dehler, *op.cit.*

IV

**Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson,
and the Triumph of Conservatism**

Enter William McKinley of Canton, Ohio—Civil War veteran, attorney at law, Congressman from Ohio’s 17th district for nearly fifteen years, and two-term governor of his home state. One standard account of his career notes that “[t]he issue with which McKinley became most closely identified during his congressional years was the protective tariff, a high tax on imported goods which served to protect American manufacturers from foreign competition.” And no sooner had McKinley been inaugurated than he “called a special session of Congress to revise customs duties upward. On July 24 he signed into law the Dingley Tariff, the highest protective tariff in American history to that time.”²⁹⁴

From that point forward, most of the new president’s most important and historic initiatives were undertaken at the behest of his secretary of state, John Adams’s great-grandson, Brooks Adams, who believed, according to William Appleman Williams, that the United States must “abandon laissez faire, accept the corporation political economy, organize it rationally and effectively, and expand it by tightening up control of the Western Hemisphere and winning economic dominance of Asia.”²⁹⁵ It was in order to implement this profoundly illiberal vision that McKinley and a handful of his closest advisors decided in 1898 to go to war against Spain.

It was the selfsame handful of Republicans that decided a short time later to harshly put down the rebellion that arose in the Philippines after U.S. victory in the war—a rebellion led by local nationalists who had dared to imagine that the end of Spanish colonial control meant true independence for their islands. Even men like William Jennings Bryan, who imagined that they “opposed colonialism,” supported McKinley and his advisors in this matter. As Williams puts it, Bryan “assumed that America would crush the Philippine revolt, keep an economic and naval base in the islands, and go on to economic predominance in Asia.”²⁹⁶ And this was the Democratic presidential candidate whom McKinley had defeated in 1896 and would defeat again in 1900—the

294 “McKinley, William.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Online at: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9049798>.

295 Williams, *Contours of American History*, op.cit., p. 364.

296 *Ibid.*, p. 368.

nominee of the party that, from its beginnings, had upheld the ideals of liberalism, including the right of national self-determination and the use of military force only to repel invasion.

Clearly, by the turn of the 20th Century, liberals were no longer in control of the Democratic party. And to the extent that certain liberals did still wield significant influence within the party, they tended to be “liberals of a more conservative persuasion,” which is to say, liberals who believed liberal goals could be attained through conservative means. We have already seen how this error fueled the socialist movement, especially in Europe, beginning in the early 19th Century. Now, in America, a hundred years later, it fueled a new “reform” movement called Progressivism. And just as socialism wound up with both a Left and a Right wing, so did Progressivism. It is useful to recall that, according to Rothbard,

there were from the beginning two different strands within Socialism: one was the Right-wing, authoritarian strand, from Saint-Simon down, which glorified statism, hierarchy, and collectivism and which was thus a projection of Conservatism trying to accept and dominate the new industrial civilization. The other was the Left-wing, relatively libertarian strand, exemplified in their different ways by Marx and Bakunin, revolutionary and far more interested in achieving the libertarian goals of liberalism and socialism: but especially the smashing of the State apparatus to achieve the “withering away of the State” and the “end of the exploitation of man by man.”²⁹⁷

Similarly, there were from the beginning two different strands within Progressivism: one was the Right-wing, authoritarian strand, best exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt. As Arthur Ekirch writes,

Roosevelt as president exemplified to a superlative degree the nationalistic side of progressivism. An enthusiastic believer in a strong centralized government, under firm executive leadership, Roosevelt was a patrician reformer who frankly preferred the principles of Alexander Hamilton to those of Thomas Jefferson. Concern over the welfare of the common man and an interest in clean government fitted in with his upper-class belief in the social responsibilities of the educated and wealthy citizen. At the same time he had only the greatest scorn for the kind of middle-class individualism and liberalism that emphasized minding one’s own business both at home and abroad.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ See note 259, above.

²⁹⁸ Ekirch, *op.cit.*, p. 172.

The other strand within Progressivism was the Left-wing, relatively libertarian strand, exemplified by the many Progressives working within the traditionally liberal Democratic party. The most important of these was the idealistic history professor and university president who became the first Democrat to win the White House in twenty years—the first Democratic occupant of that building since the days of Grover Cleveland—Thomas Woodrow Wilson.

John Dos Passos famously sketched Wilson's career in "Meester Veelson," a once notorious chapter of 1919, Dos Passos's historical novel of World War I. "Meester Veelson" actually first saw print two months before the novel's publication, in January 1932 in *The New Republic*. James J. Martin described it thirty years later as having been "about as fierce a piece on Wilson and the wartime 'liberalism' as ever appeared in any paper in America."²⁹⁹ "The year [1856] that Buchanan was elected president," Dos Passos wrote,

Thomas Woodrow Wilson was born to a presbyterian minister's daughter in the manse at Staunton in the valley of Virginia; it was the old Scotch-Irish stock; the father was a presbyterian minister too and a teacher of rhetoric in theological seminaries; [...] Dr. Wilson was a man of standing who loved his home and his children and good books and his wife and correct syntax and talked to God every day at family prayers; he brought his sons up between the bible and the dictionary.

The one of his sons who concerns us most here would have taken rather slowly to either of those guidebooks, however. For, as Dos Passos reminds us, "Tommy was a backward child, didn't learn his letters till he was nine, but when he learned to read his favorite reading was Parson Weems' *Life of Washington*." Still, by the time he was fourteen—that was the year his father "was called to the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina"—he'd become bookish enough. He graduated high school and enrolled in Davidson College, and "then he went to Princeton and became a debater and editor of the *Princetonian*. His first published article in the Nassau Literary Magazine was an appreciation of Bismarck."³⁰⁰

Dos Passos's later account of Wilson's early years, in his historical work *Mr. Wilson's War* (1962), contains nothing that contradicts his earlier portrait; the later version does, however, fill in some interesting details. Wilson's mother, it turns out, was "the daughter of Thomas

²⁹⁹ Martin, *American Liberalism and World Politics*, op.cit., p.79.

³⁰⁰ John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (New York: Library of America, 1996), pp. 564-565.

Woodrow, a Scottish minister” who “came of a long line of Presbyterian divines.” So it was Presbyterian clergy for generations on both sides of the family. Also, “Woodrow Wilson was still a babe in arms when his handsome preacher father, who was becoming famous for the high style and fine delivery of his sermons, was called to Augusta, Georgia, to become pastor of the First Presbyterian Church there.” So the future president grew up, not in his home state of Virginia, but in Georgia, where, “[t]hrough the father and mother were both Ohiobred they absorbed the politics of their parishioners. Dr. Wilson became an ardent secessionist.” Yet another interesting detail: “For the first ten years of his life Tommy as he was known was the only boy in a family of girls. His parents destined him for the ministry as a matter of course.”³⁰¹

As things worked out, Dos Passos tells us in his later account, the Wilsons lived only briefly in Columbia, South Carolina. By the time, only two years later, when Tommy was ready to enroll at Davidson (near Charlotte), the family had already moved on to North Carolina, where Dr. Wilson had “accepted a call to a large church in Wilmington.” It was the early 1870s. Tommy’s reading had made it clear to him that he did not wish to pursue a career as a Presbyterian clergyman. In his father’s copies of “the *Edinburgh Review* and [...] Godkin’s *Nation*” he had begun

to read of debates in the British House of Commons. These were the years of the great liberals. England was in a period of fervid parliamentary activity. The slender shy awkward lad—“an old young man” the Wilsons’ colored butler called him—began to throw all his youthful passion into imagining himself a Cobden or a John Bright thundering from the opposition benches under the hallowed rafters of St. Stephens. Instead of drawings of fullrigged ships [a youthful enthusiasm of Tommy’s] a portrait of Gladstone appeared above his desk.³⁰²

It is noteworthy that Dos Passos should choose Richard Cobden and his close friend and fellow MP John Bright as representative of the sort of politician that inspired the young Woodrow Wilson. For Cobden and Bright were among the most radical and most important of 19th Century English liberals. In the late 1970s, Murray Rothbard briefly surveyed the “classical English liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” and singled out for special praise

³⁰¹ John Dos Passos, *Mr. Wilson’s War: From the Assassination of McKinley to the Defeat of the League of Nations* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), p. 31.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

such laissez-faire “extremists” as Richard Cobden and John Bright of the “Manchester School.” Cobden and Bright took the lead in vigorously opposing every British war and foreign political intervention of their era and for his pains Cobden was known not as an “isolationist” but as the “International Man.” Until the smear campaign of the late 1930s, opponents of war were considered the true “internationalists,” men who opposed the aggrandizement of the nation-state and favored peace, free trade, free migration and peaceful cultural exchanges among peoples of all nations. Foreign intervention is “international” only in the sense that war is international: coercion, whether the threat of force or the outright movement of troops, will always cross frontiers between one nation and another.³⁰³

As for Gladstone, the Libertarian Historian Jim Powell reports that “[h]e entered Parliament at age twenty-three, first held a cabinet post at thirty-four, and delivered his last speech as a member when he was eighty-four. He served as prime minister four times.” He “dominated British politics in the heyday of classical liberalism.” He “helped abolish more than one thousand—about 95 percent—of Britain’s tariffs, and he cut and abolished other taxes year after year.” He “believed the cost of war should be a deterrent to militarism and insisted on a policy of financing war by taxation. He opposed borrowing money for war, because this would make conflict easier and future generations would be unfairly burdened.”³⁰⁴ Altogether, at the beginning of his intellectual odyssey, Woodrow Wilson exhibited what Arthur Ekirch calls “a good deal of nostalgic sympathy for a Jeffersonian type of liberal society,” as well as “a deep admiration for the point of view of classic, nineteenth-century English political and economic liberalism.”³⁰⁵

After three years at Davidson, Wilson transferred to Princeton, where he spent most of his time “reading and debating about politics, statesmanship and constitutional law.” Just as he had in North Carolina, he “devoured the witty accounts of the debates in British parliament he found in the library.” Later, he also “founded a new society: The Liberal Debating Club, modelled on the British parliament, for which he himself furnished the constitution.” Next he moved on to the University of Virginia, where he earned his law degree. By this time, he had pretty firmly decided on a career in politics. As he wrote to his fiancée in the 1880s, looking back on his choices of years earlier, “The profession I

303 Rothbard, *For a New Liberty*, op.cit., pp. 263-264.

304 Jim Powell, *The Triumph of Liberty: A 2,000-Year History, Told Through the Lives of Freedom’s Greatest Champions* (New York: Free Press, 2000), p. 131.

305 Ekirch, op.cit., p. 197.

chose was politics; the profession I entered was the law. I chose the one because I thought it would lead to the other.”³⁰⁶

Unfortunately, both the study and the practice of law proved distinctly not to his liking. As the John Dos Passos of 1932 put it, “lawpractice irked him; he was more at home in the booky air of libraries, lecture-rooms, college chapel, it was a relief to leave his lawpractice at Atlanta and take a Historical Fellowship at Johns Hopkins” in Baltimore, where he earned his Ph.D. He “moved to a professorship at Wesleyan, wrote articles, started a History of the United States.” Over the next decade or so, teaching, writing, travelling the country on the lecture circuit, Wilson “climbed all the steps of a brilliant university career; in 1901 the trustees of Princeton offered him the presidency.”³⁰⁷ He was forty-five years old. He took the job. And less than a decade later, Thomas Fleming writes, he “had left that presidency in a cloud of acrimony, having alienated almost everyone on the faculty and the board of trustees.” A single example may serve to illustrate the perspective of the professors and trustees in this matter. “The one talent Wilson displayed in complicated disputes about a building for the graduate school and reorganizing the college around a ‘Quad Plan’ was a gift for denouncing his opponents as traitors to America’s ideals.”³⁰⁸ Still, in 1910, “the democratic bosses of New Jersey, hardpressed by muckrakers and reformers, got the bright idea of offering the nomination for governor to the stainless college president who attracted such large audiences.”³⁰⁹

Wilson accepted the nomination and won the election “by a huge plurality” and “left Princeton only half reformed to be Governor of New Jersey.” Scarcely two years later he accepted the Democratic party’s nomination for president of the United States, and won the subsequent election. “[S]o he left the State of New Jersey halfreformed [...] and went to the White House our twentyeighth president.”³¹⁰

By this time, his old commitment to liberal ideals had undergone something of a transformation. For though Ekirch says of Wilson that it was only “in the later stages of his career, as he turned his attention from the academic world to the chance of success in politics, that he began to embrace the nationalistic and progressive currents of his time,” we have

306 Dos Passos, *Mr. Wilson’s War*, op.cit., pp. 32, 33.

307 Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, op.cit., p. 565.

308 Thomas Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 3.

309 Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, op.cit., p. 565.

310 *Ibid.*, p. 566.

already noted, with John Dos Passos, that first published article by the newly minted Princeton undergraduate, “an appreciation of Bismarck.”³¹¹ “What of the intellectuals of the Progressive period,” Murray Rothbard wrote in 1965, “damned by the present-day Right as ‘socialistic’? Socialistic in a sense they were, but what kind of ‘socialism’? The conservative State Socialism of Bismarck’s Germany, the prototype for so much of modern European—and American—political forms [...]”³¹²

From the beginning, that is, Thomas Woodrow Wilson had admired liberal ideals, but he had also been drawn to conservative methods of attempting to realize those ideals. And his two terms as president can only be characterized as an orgy of conservative policymaking. His policies, Ekirch writes, “seemed to vacillate between [those proposed by] conservative business interests and the demands of the more nationalistic progressives.”³¹³ With respect to domestic policy, Wilson, the “liberal,” was scarcely distinguishable from Theodore Roosevelt, the GOP conservative. In foreign affairs, the story was a bit different. As Arthur S. Link put it in his 1954 study *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917*, “[t]he years from 1913 to 1921 witnessed intervention by the State Department and the navy on a scale that had never before been contemplated, even by such alleged imperialists as Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.”³¹⁴ According to Ekirch, Wilson considered “an expansion of foreign trade vital, not only to the interests of the United States but also to world peace.” Accordingly,

the Wilson administration aggressively pursued American commercial interests in the Far East and in Latin America, expanded the foreign trade divisions of the Department of Commerce, and developed the American merchant marine. Wilson no doubt would have preferred the growth of United States foreign trade to come about as a result of free international competition, but he found it easy with his ideas of moralism and duty to rationalize direct American intervention as a means of safeguarding the national interest.³¹⁵

And then, of course, the Wilson administration led America into World War I. “Five months after his reelection on the slogan *He kept us out of war*,” John Dos Passos wrote in 1932, “Wilson pushed the Armed Ship Bill through congress and declared that a state of war existed be-

³¹¹ Ekirch, op.cit., p. 197.

³¹² Rothbard, *Left and Right*, op.cit., p. 21.

³¹³ Ekirch, op.cit., p. 198.

³¹⁴ Quoted in Ekirch, op.cit., p. 199.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

tween the United States and the Central Powers.” Thereupon, “Wilson became the state (war is the health of the state), Washington his Versailles [...]”³¹⁶ Robert Higgs puts the same idea even more plainly. “More than anything the Progressives had achieved,” he writes,

war undercut American liberties and fed the growth of Big Government. Notwithstanding the accretions of governmental authority during the Progressive Era, the American economy remained, as late as 1916, predominantly a market system. The next two years, however, witnessed an enormous and wholly unprecedented intervention of the federal government in the nation’s economic affairs. By the time of the armistice the government had taken over the ocean shipping, railroad, telephone, and telegraph industries; commandeered hundreds of manufacturing plants; entered into massive economic enterprises on its own account in such varied departments as shipbuilding, wheat trading, and building construction; undertaken to lend huge sums to businesses directly or indirectly and to regulate the private issuance of securities; established official priorities for the use of transportation facilities, food, fuel, and many raw materials; fixed the prices of dozens of important commodities; intervened in hundreds of labor disputes; and conscripted millions of men for service in the armed forces. It had, in short, extensively distorted or wholly displaced markets, creating what some contemporaries called “war socialism.”³¹⁷

And to say all this is still to say nothing about the Wilson administration’s implacable hostility toward freedom of speech or its sponsorship of what Eric Foner calls “one of the most sweeping repressions of the right to dissent in all of American history.”³¹⁸

V

Herbert Hoover’s New Deal

The election of 1920 returned the White House to Republican hands with the ascendance of Warren G. Harding to the presidency. Harding served only two years before dying of a heart attack during a political

³¹⁶ Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, op.cit., p. 567.

³¹⁷ Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 123.

³¹⁸ Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, op.cit., p. 721.

visit to San Francisco. His term was completed by his vice president, Calvin Coolidge, who was then elected to a four-year term all his own. Harding, in his inaugural address, “said that the United States was ready to confer with ‘nations great and small’ to promote disarmament and any other program that would ‘lessen the probability of war.’”³¹⁹ And his foreign policy, and the foreign policies of his Republican successors, Coolidge and Hoover, were noticeably less bellicose than the foreign policy of Woodrow Wilson—or, for that matter, the foreign policy of the GOP’s most recent superstar president, Teddy Roosevelt.

In every other respect, however, the Republican administrations of the 1920s were perfectly traditional Republican administrations. “The party now in power in this country,” Calvin Coolidge said in 1922, when he was vice president of the United States, “through its present declaration of principles, through the traditions which it inherited from its predecessors, the Federalists and Whigs, through their achievements and its own, is representative of those policies which were adopted under the lead of Alexander Hamilton.”³²⁰

The Hamiltonian economic program, as we have seen, is based on tariffs, subsidies to favored businesses, and public works. In 1922, the Harding administration moved “to enact tariff bills restoring the system of protection for manufacturers,” though it was necessary to accept “high duties on raw materials and agricultural produce” as part of the price of success in the venture.³²¹ In 1926, according to Murray Rothbard, Coolidge attempted to prop up the domestic cotton industry by awarding “grants totaling \$10 million [...] to government-sponsored farm organizations to buy cotton at a certain price.” A year earlier, “[a]ddressing the Associated General Contractors of America (a group that stood to gain by a government building program), Coolidge had called for public works planning to stabilize depressions.”³²²

What Coolidge called for, Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce under both Harding and Coolidge, implemented. As Paul Johnson puts it, “President Hoover, who had risen to worldwide prominence in the war by managing relief schemes, and had then held high economic office throughout the twenties before moving into the White House

³¹⁹ Fleming, *Illusion*, op.cit., p. 472.

³²⁰ Quoted in Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, II, op.cit., p. 699.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 693.

³²² Murray N. Rothbard, *America’s Great Depression*. Fifth Edition. (Auburn, AL: Mises Institute, 2000 [1963]), pp. 225–226, 197.

itself in 1929, was a born planner, meddler, orderer, and exhorter.” Not surprisingly,

Hoover’s was the only department of the U.S. federal government which had expanded steadily in numbers and power during the 1920s, and he had constantly urged Presidents Harding and Coolidge to take a more active role in managing the economy. [...] When Hoover finally took over the White House, he followed his own advice, and made it an engine of interference, first pumping more credit into an already overheated economy and, then, when the bubble burst, doing everything in his power to organize government rescue operations.³²³

The policy of “pumping more credit into an already overheated economy”—the policy which caused the economic downturns that seemed to cry out for Hoover’s “government rescue operations”—was one that Hoover had inherited from his immediate predecessors in the White House. As Rothbard notes, “[a]n inflationary, low-discount-rate policy was a prominent and important feature of the Harding and Coolidge administrations.”³²⁴

And what form did Hoover’s “government rescue operations” take? According to William Appleman Williams, he

pulled out every antidepression tool the Progressives ever owned. He first tried, as had Theodore Roosevelt in the Panic of 1907, to coerce and wheedle financial leaders such as Andrew Mellon and Thomas Lamont into underwriting the stock market and thereby stopping the downturn. They lacked both the will and the capital. Hoover then recommended or approved a wide spectrum of recovery measures. The Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 established the principle of collective bargaining as the law of the land. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation provided the model as well as one of the key instruments of most New Deal financing of domestic production and overseas economic expansion. Hoover asked also for [...] a \$423 million public works program, more credit for farmers, new guarantees for bank deposits, more liberal bankruptcy laws, and direct-relief appropriations.

In sum, Williams argues, “The policies that Hoover did finally employ in his efforts to halt the depression provided the rudiments of [Franklin] Roosevelt’s program.”³²⁵

Rothbard agrees. He wrote in 1963 that

323 Paul Johnson, “Introduction to the Fifth Edition” in Rothbard, *America’s Great Depression*, op.cit., p. xv.

324 Rothbard, *America’s Great Depression*, op.cit., p. 121.

325 Williams, *Contours*, op.cit., p. 438.

if we define “New Deal” as an antidepression program marked by extensive governmental economic planning and intervention—including bolstering of wage rates and prices, expansion of credit, propping up of weak firms, and increased government spending (e.g., subsidies to unemployment and public works)—Herbert Clark Hoover must be considered the founder of the New Deal in America. Hoover, from the very start of the depression, set his course unerringly toward the violation of all the *laissez-faire* canons. As a consequence, he left office with the economy at the depths of an unprecedented depression, with no recovery in sight after three and a half years, and with unemployment at the terrible and unprecedented rate of 25 percent of the labor force.³²⁶

The fact is, according to Rothbard, that Hoover was “the founder of every single one of the features of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.”³²⁷ Benjamin M. Anderson saw things in exactly the same way. Anderson was a former economics professor at Columbia and Harvard who served as senior economist for the Chase National Bank of New York City throughout the ’20s and ’30s, then returned to teaching at UCLA for the last decade of his life. Anderson was at Chase at the time Hoover was implementing his antidepression program. He watched it take shape, occupying a front-row seat. And, again according to Rothbard, Anderson’s name for what the president did during the period 1929-1932 was “the Hoover New Deal.”³²⁸

Of course, all this flies in the face of most people’s understanding of Herbert Hoover. As Rothbard notes,

[t]he conventional wisdom, of historian and layman alike, pictures Herbert Hoover as the last stubborn guardian of *laissez-faire* in America. The *laissez-faire* economy, so this wisdom runs, produced the Great Depression in 1929, and Hoover’s traditional, do-nothing policies could not stem the tide. Hence, Hoover and his hidebound policies were swept away, and Franklin Roosevelt entered to bring to America a New Deal, a new progressive economy of state regulation and intervention fit for the modern age.³²⁹

On the other hand, as Williams has argued, “[m]ore than any other 20th Century American’s, Hoover’s reputation is the product of mis-

326 Rothbard, *America’s Great Depression*, op.cit., p. 186.

327 Murray N. Rothbard, “Herbert Hoover and the Myth of Laissez-Faire” in *A. of Leviathan: Essays on the Rise of the American Corporate State*, ed. Ronald Radosh and Murray N. Rothbard (New York: Dutton, 1972), p. 127.

328 Rothbard, *America’s Great Depression*, op.cit., p. 186.

329 Rothbard, “Herbert Hoover,” op.cit., p. III.

information and distortion.”³³⁰ The “conventional wisdom” described above by Rothbard is certainly an example of “misinformation and distortion,” for, as we have seen, the truth of the matter is almost the exact reverse of this picture.

Consider, then, the situation of a traditional American liberal—an advocate of individual liberty, free markets, free trade, and international peace—in late 1932, just after the presidential election. Though the Republican party had held the White House and dominated Congress for most of a century and had done its absolute damndest to grow the federal government into the sort of leviathan which would make Alexander Hamilton proud, still, the federal government of December 1932 was a tiny, toothless thing by present-day standards. Its capital city of Washington, according to William Manchester, “was a slumbering village in summer, largely forgotten the rest of the year. In size it ranked fourteenth among American cities,” which made it about as big and important, relatively speaking, as Columbus or Jacksonville in the America of today. “Most big national problems,” Manchester recalls, “were decided in New York, where the money was; when federal action was required, Manhattan’s big corporation lawyers—men like Charles Evans Hughes, Henry L. Stimson, and Elihu Root—came down to guide their Republican protégés. President Coolidge had usually finished his official day by lunchtime.” His successor, Herbert Hoover, “created a stir by becoming the the first Chief Executive to have a telephone on his desk. He also employed five secretaries—no previous President had required more than one—and summoned them by an elaborate buzzer system.”³³¹

Still, even the Hoover administration was remarkably compact—again, by present-day standards. As Manchester notes,

Foggy Bottom, the site of the present State Department Building, was a Negro slum. The land now occupied by the Pentagon was an agricultural experimental station and thus typical of Washington’s outskirts; “large areas very close to the heart of the nation’s lawmaking,” the *Saturday Evening Post* observed, “are still in farm hands.” The government employed fewer than two thousand foreign service officers. It is an astonishing fact that the Secretaries of State, War, and Navy were all under one mansard roof, across the street from the White House in that ugly, smug mass of balusters, cupolas, and pillared porticoes known today as the Executive Office Building. In-

³³⁰ Williams, *Contours*, op.cit., p. 426.

³³¹ William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 3.

deed, after a fire gutted the President's oval office in 1929, he and his staff had moved in with them and no one had felt crowded.

Moreover, “[t]here was little pomp. [...] If you called on the Secretary of State, he sometimes met you at the door.”³³²

In 1932, according to John T. Flynn, there were no federal “subsidies to farmers, [...] handouts to the indigent, [or] support [for] schools.” The federal government did not “build hospitals [or] provide medical care.”³³³ And though it did undertake national defense, it did so much more cheaply than Americans of today are accustomed to seeing. “The U.S. had the sixteenth largest army in the world” in 1932, Manchester reports, “putting it behind, among others, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Spain, Romania, and Poland.” And most of those in uniform “were committed to desk work, patrolling the Mexican border, and protecting U.S. possessions overseas.” What remained to defend the United States from anyone other than Mexico was “30,000 troops—fewer than the force King George sent to tame his rebellious American colonies in 1776.”³³⁴ In constant dollars, this army cost about one-eighth of one percent of what today's military costs the U.S. taxpayer. In 1932, the federal government was seizing less than five percent of our national income, so it had to be a good deal more frugal than the federal government of 2005, which claimed a fraction more than five times that size.

The Great Depression was underway in 1932, of course—had been for three and a half years. Around a quarter of the workforce was out of work, banks were failing, times were hard. And President Hoover had only made matters worse. Flynn saw the “Hoover New Deal” as an effort to virtually nationalize the U.S. economy, an effort “to organize every profession, every trade, every craft under [government] supervision and to deal directly with such details as the volume of production, the prices, the means and methods of distribution of every conceivable product.”³³⁵

Fortunately, however, from the liberal point of view, President Hoover had been voted out of office after a single term in the White House. The American electorate had repudiated his approach to fighting the depression and had elected the Democratic candidate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man who stood for small government and fiscal responsibility.

332 Ibid., p. 4.

333 John T. Flynn, *The Decline of the American Republic* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1955), p. 113.

334 Manchester, op.cit., p. 5.

335 John T. Flynn, *The Roosevelt Myth* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1949 [1948]), p. 38.

VI

The Myth of the “Old Right”

This was evident from the platform on which Roosevelt had run—a platform that called for

- “1. An immediate and drastic reduction of governmental expenditures by abolishing useless commissions and offices, consolidating departments and bureaus and eliminating extravagance, to accomplish a saving of not less than 25 percent in the cost of Federal government. . . .
- “2. Maintenance of the national credit by a Federal budget annually balanced
- “3. A sound currency to be maintained at all hazards.”

Nor was this platform meant to be taken as mere empty rhetoric of the sort people today tend to assume is characteristic of virtually all public statements by politicians. No. As Garet Garrett of the *Saturday Evening Post* pointed out in 1938, “Mr. Roosevelt pledged himself to be bound by this platform as no President had ever before been bound by a party document. All during the campaign he supported it with words that could not possibly be misunderstood.” He said, for example,

“I accuse the present Administration of being the greatest spending Administration in peace time in all American history—one which piled bureau on bureau, commission on commission, and has failed to anticipate the dire needs or reduced earning power of the people. Bureaus and bureaucrats have been retained at the expense of the taxpayer. . . . We are spending altogether too much money for government services which are neither practical nor necessary. In addition to this, we are attempting too many functions and we need a simplification of what the Federal government is giving to the people.”³³⁶

Roosevelt was particularly adamant on the subject of government borrowing.

Toward the end of the campaign he cried: “Stop the deficits! Stop the deficits!” Then to impress his listeners with his inflexible purpose to deal with this prodigal monster, he said: “Before any man enters my cabinet he must give me a twofold pledge: Absolute loyalty to the Democratic platform and especially to its economy plank. And com-

336 Garet Garrett, *The People's Pottage* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton, 1953), p. 27.

plete cooperation with me in looking to economy and reorganization in his department.”³³⁷

True, Roosevelt’s political track record was somewhat worrisome, for “as governor he took New York State from the hands of Al Smith with a surplus of \$15,000,000 and left it with a deficit of \$90,000,000.” Still, “[t]here was nothing revolutionary in” what he was now telling the voters.

It was [...] actually an old-time Democratic platform based upon fairly well-accepted principles of the traditional Democratic party. That party had always denounced the tendency to strong central government, the creation of new bureaus. It had always denounced deficit financing. Its central principle of action was a minimum of government in business.³³⁸

By contrast, since the time of Lincoln, the Republican party had always stood for strong central government, top-heavy bureaucracy, and hefty handouts to big business. The fact that the voters had evicted a Republican from the White House and elected a Democrat surely meant that American public opinion was leaning in a more liberal direction.

But of course Franklin Roosevelt dashed all such liberal hopes within the first hundred days of his administration. In effect, once elected, he tossed the Democratic platform of 1932 into the trash can and proceeded to show the electorate that he could play the conservative game better than any Republican. First he took Hoover’s Hamiltonian policies and enormously expanded them; then, astonishingly, he had the effrontery to describe himself and his stolen program as “liberal.”

John T. Flynn, journalist and commentator and a noted liberal spokesman since the 1920s, wrote in 1940 that “I see the standard of liberalism that I have followed all my life flying over a group of causes which, as a liberal along with all liberals, I have abhorred all my life.”³³⁹ Nor was Flynn alone in this feeling. A number of prominent liberals, many of them writers and intellectuals, had enthusiastically supported FDR in the 1932 election, believing that he meant to adhere to the classically liberal Democratic party platform for that year. In addition to Flynn, these included H. L. Mencken, editor of the *American Mercury*; Isabel Paterson, iconoclastic editor and columnist at the *New York Herald Tribune* Sunday “Books” section; and Garet Gar-

337 Flynn, *The Roosevelt Myth*, op.cit., p. 37.

338 Ibid., pp. 37, 36.

339 Quoted in John E. Moser, *Right Turn: John T. Flynn and the Transformation of American Liberalism* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p. 3.

rett, chief editorialist at the *Saturday Evening Post*. They were joined in their bitter opposition to the Roosevelt New Deal by other writers and intellectuals who, irrespective of the candidate they had supported in the 1932 election, were also old-fashioned liberals appalled by what FDR was doing under the once good liberal name. These included Albert Jay Nock, former editor of the *Freeman* and regular contributor to the *American Mercury*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's*; Rose Wilder Lane, prolific freelance journalist and author; Henry Hazlitt, Mencken's successor as editor of the *American Mercury* and later writer on economic issues for *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*; and Felix Morley, editor of the *Washington Post* from 1933 to 1940 and winner of a Pulitzer Prize for distinguished editorial writing.

Certain students of American intellectual history—Rothbard is among them, unfortunately—have dubbed this group of writers and intellectuals, along with the handful of politicians who adopted a similar hostility toward New Deal domestic and/or foreign policy during the 1930s and early '40s, the "Old Right." "The Old Right," declares Internet pundit Justin Raimondo in his 1993 book *Reclaiming the American Right*, "was that loose grouping of intellectuals, writers, publicists, and politicians who vocally opposed the New Deal and bitterly resisted U.S. entry into World War II."³⁴⁰

"[T]he 'Old Right' was born," writes Jude Blanchette of the Foundation for Economic Education,

in protest to Roosevelt and the New Deal. Its leaders were H. L. Mencken, Albert Jay Nock, Garet Garrett, John T. Flynn, Suzanne La Follette and Felix Morley. It is notable that what one finds in their writings one can still find in the work of most libertarians today. In fact, it could be argued that the modern libertarian movement has more in common with conservatives of the 30s and 40s than do contemporary conservatives. The ideas of the Old Right conservatives (skepticism of government planning, isolationist foreign policy and a general belief in the free market) have taken a back seat to the modern conservative emphasis on domestic pragmatism and international interventionism.³⁴¹

"The intellectual leaders of this old Right of World War II and the immediate aftermath," Rothbard wrote in 1964,

³⁴⁰ Justin Raimondo, *Reclaiming the American Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conservative Movement* (Burlingame, CA: Center for Libertarian Studies, 1993), p. 52.

³⁴¹ Jude Blanchette, "Libertarianism, Conservatism, and All That." 16 November 2004. Online at <http://www.mises.org/fullstory.aspx?id=1674>

were then and remain today almost unknown among the larger body of American intellectuals: Albert Jay Nock, Rose Wilder Lane, Isabel Paterson, Frank Chodorov, Garet Garrett. It almost takes a great effort of the will to recall the principles and Objectives of the old Right, so different is the current Right-wing today. The stress, as we have noted, was on individual liberty in all its aspects as against state power: on freedom of speech and action, on economic liberty, on voluntary relations as opposed to coercion, on a peaceful foreign policy. The great threat to that liberty was state power, in its invasion of personal freedom and private property and in its burgeoning military despotism. Philosophically, the major emphasis was on the natural rights of man, arrived at by an investigation through reason of the laws of man's nature. Historically, the intellectual heroes of the old Right were such libertarians as John Locke, the Levellers, Jefferson, Paine, Thoreau, Cobden, Spencer, and Bastiat.

“In short,” Rothbard wrote, “this libertarian Right based itself on eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism, and began systematically to extend that doctrine even further.”³⁴²

But if they were extending the doctrine of *liberalism* even further, they must have been *liberals*, right? They must have been men and women of the Left, not the Right—right? John Moser reports of John T. Flynn that “[t]o the end of his life he never referred to himself as anything but a liberal [...]. Flynn claimed that it was the American political climate that changed during his lifetime, not he. Indeed, he believed that the very term *liberal* had been hijacked.”³⁴³

Flynn was correct. The writers and intellectuals who made up the most visible contingent of the “Old Right” were in no meaningful sense on the Right at all. They were on the Left, where they had always been. They were liberals. The term *liberal* had in fact been hijacked. The “two-party system” in the United States now consisted of two conservative parties and no liberal party. A great many of the liberals who had been left in the lurch by the Democratic party's sudden more or less official adoption of conservatism in liberal clothing made the mistake of joining (or, at any rate, supporting) the Republican party—presumably in the belief that the opposition party, whatever its fundamental character, was where they now belonged.

As Rothbard acknowledges, the “Old Right” was a coalition, in which the libertarians and individualists—the True Liberals—were not dominant. Nevertheless, he writes, they

³⁴² Rothbard, “The Transformation of the American Right,” op.cit.

³⁴³ Moser, *Right Turn*, op.cit., p. 3.

set the tone, since individualist and libertarian rhetoric provided the only general concepts with which New Deal measures could be opposed. The result, however, was that hack Republican politicians found themselves mouthing libertarian and antistatist slogans that they did not really believe—a condition that set the stage for a later “moderation” and abandonment of their seemingly cherished principles.³⁴⁴

More important, a great many of the liberals who had been driven into the GOP, though “at first properly scornful of their new-found allies, soon began to accept them and even to don cheerfully the formerly despised label of ‘conservative.’”³⁴⁵

And so it was that

the libertarians, especially in their sense of where they stood in the ideological spectrum, fused with the older conservatives who were forced to adopt libertarian phraseology (but with no real libertarian content) in opposing a Roosevelt Administration that had become too collectivistic for them, either in content or in rhetoric. World War II reinforced and cemented this alliance; for, in contrast to all the previous American wars of the century, the pro-peace and “isolationist” forces were all identified, by their enemies and subsequently by themselves, as men of the “right.” By the end of World War II, it was second nature for libertarians to consider themselves at an “extreme right-wing” pole with the conservatives immediately to the left of them; and hence the great error of the spectrum that persists to this day. In particular, the modern libertarians forgot or never realized that opposition to war and militarism had always been a “left-wing” tradition which had included libertarians; and hence when the historical aberration of the New Deal period corrected itself and the “Right-wing” was once again the great partisan of total war, the libertarians were unprepared to understand what was happening and tailed along in the wake of their supposed conservative “allies.” The liberals had completely lost their old ideological markings and guidelines.³⁴⁶

The irony of all this was that the New Deal, the program of the fraudulent “liberals” of the Roosevelt administration, was, at heart, a profoundly conservative program. “Almost everything done during the Hundred Days,” Robert Higgs reminds us, “relied on the emergency rationale and the wartime analogy. Many programs employed during World War I were resurrected.” Moreover, “[t]he administrators of the

344 Murray N. Rothbard, “Life in the Old Right.” August 1994. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard45.html>

345 Rothbard, *Left and Right*, op.cit., p. 23.

346 Ibid., pp. 24-25.

programs came largely from the ranks of the veterans of the wartime mobilization. The rhetoric and the symbols harkened back to that glorious occasion of extraordinary national solidarity.”³⁴⁷ In effect, then, the First New Deal, as FDR’s program during 1933 and 1934 is generally called, was merely a rebirth of the policies of Woodrow Wilson—policies which were virtually indistinguishable from the Hamiltonian conservatism of Theodore Roosevelt.

It is sometimes asserted that the so-called Second New Deal, the package of policies FDR pushed during the period from 1935 to 1938, shifted the federal government’s emphasis away from legislation aimed at “cartelization and other suppressions of market competition” to benefit big business and big labor and toward legislation aimed at “helping the underdogs and building the welfare state.” It is further asserted that such welfare state legislation was opposed by the big business interests that most benefited from conservative policymaking. But this view of what happened in the mid to late 1930s is unduly simplistic. Much of the legislation supposedly designed during the Second New Deal to help “underdogs,” like the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, was anticipated by one of the First New Deal’s key creations, the National Recovery Administration (NRA), launched in June of 1933. As Higgs notes, the “minimum wages, maximum hours, and working conditions” stipulated by the Fair Labor Standards Act were “much like those required under the NRA’s codes of fair competition.” On the whole, laws like the Second New Deal’s Fair Labor Standards Act should properly be regarded as the “progeny” or “spawn” of the earlier NRA.³⁴⁸

Moreover, the minimum wage, maximum hour, and working conditions provisions of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA), the enabling legislation that created the NRA, were neither intended to benefit the downtrodden, nor imposed on big businessmen against their will. As Ronald Radosh argued, back when he was a New Left Historian, the provisions in question were actually intended to benefit the big businessmen, who could use them to increase costs for their smaller competitors. In the minds of these big businessmen, their smaller competitors were competing “unfairly by cutting costs through wage reductions.”³⁴⁹ Radosh approvingly quotes John T. Flynn’s 1934 remark that, when it came to the NRA, “[i]ndustry wanted not freedom from regula-

347 Higgs, *op.cit.*, p. 194.

348 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

349 Ronald Radosh, “The Myth of the New Deal,” in *A New History of Leviathan*, *op.cit.*, p. 191.

tion, but the right to enjoy regulation.” And in fact, as Arthur Ekirch points out, “it was industry itself that had largely prepared the regulations governing prices and production” enforced by the NRA.³⁵⁰

Taken as a whole, Radosh maintains, “[t]he New Deal was conservative. Its special form of conservatism was the development of reforms that modernized corporate capitalism and brought corporate law to reflect the system’s changed nature.”³⁵¹ Or, as Rothbard puts it,

After a bit of leftish wavering in the middle and late ’thirties, the Roosevelt Administration re-cemented its alliance with big business in the national defense and war contract economy that began in 1940. This was an economy and a polity that has been ruling America ever since, embodied in the permanent war economy, the full-fledged State monopoly capitalism and neo-mercantilism, the military-industrial complex of the present era. The essential features of American society have not changed since it was thoroughly militarized and politicized in World War II—except that the trends intensify, and even in everyday life men have been increasingly moulded into conforming Organization Men serving the State and its military-industrial complex.”³⁵²

The Libertarian Historian Leonard Liggio takes a similar position, arguing that

the pre-war New Deal benefited big business through government privileges and concentration of economic power as much as had Hoover’s policies, of which the New Deal was basically a continuation. However, the most significant result of the war economy was the increased concentration of economic power which big business derived from government contracts, and the establishment of a close relationship between big business and the military [...].³⁵³

The New Deal was, as John T. Flynn insisted while it was happening, “a form of conservatism dressed up as liberalism.”³⁵⁴ The “liberals” who pushed it were actually conservatives. And the members of the “Old Right” who opposed it were actually liberals. In his brief history of “the ‘Old Right’ Jeffersonians,” Sheldon Richman acknowledges this. “That the movement was placed on the right or called ‘conservative’ has to be regarded a quirk of political semantics,” he writes.

350 Ekirch, *op.cit.*, p. 276.

351 Radosh, *op.cit.*, p. 187.

352 Rothbard, *Left and Right*, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

353 Leonard P. Liggio, *Why the Futile Crusade?* (New York: Center for Libertarian Studies, 1978), p. 14.

354 Moser, *op.cit.*, p. 113.

In a superficial sense it qualified as right-wing because it seemed to be defending the status quo from the state-sponsored egalitarian change of the New Deal. But in a deeper sense, the New Deal actually was a defense of the corporatist status quo threatened by the Great Depression. Thus the Old Right was not truly right-wing, and since that is so, it should not be bothersome that some palpable left-wingers, such as Norman Thomas and Robert La Follette, Jr., seemed at home in the Old Right.³⁵⁵

Nor was the opposition to the New Deal primarily a Republican phenomenon. Rothbard notes that Democratic politicians like Representative Samuel Pettingill of Indiana, "Governor Albert Ritchie of Maryland, who was a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1932, and Senator James A. Reed from Missouri" were prominent in the movement against the New Deal.³⁵⁶ Ronald Radosh adds the names of Senators "Burton K. Wheeler (D. Mont.) [...] and Hugo Black (D. Ala.)."³⁵⁷ Sheldon Richman suggests "Senators Carter Glass of Virginia, Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma, and Harry Byrd of Virginia," as well as such "Cleveland Democrats" as "Bennett Champ Clark of Missouri, Patrick McCarran of Nevada, and David I. Walsh of Massachusetts."³⁵⁸

In fact, it was members of the Democratic party, not the Republican party, who mounted the first organized offensive against the New Deal, which they regarded as a betrayal of the liberal principles that had long served as their party's ideological foundation. The first national organization opposed to the New Deal, the American Liberty League, was founded in 1934 by a group of prominent Democrats. There was Jouett Shouse, former Democratic congressman from Kansas, former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in the Wilson administration, former chairman of the Democratic National Executive Committee, and former president of the predominantly Democratic Association Against the Prohibition Amendment. There was John J. Raskob, former Democratic National Committee chairman and executive of the Du Pont company and General Motors. There was John W. Davis, the 1924 Democratic presidential candidate and a J. P. Morgan & Company attorney. And there was Al Smith, former governor of New York and

355 Sheldon Richman, "New Deal Nemesis: The 'Old Right' Jeffersonians." *Independent Review* Fall 1996, p. 203.

356 Murray N. Rothbard, "Life in the Old Right." op.cit. See also Murray N. Rothbard, "The Life and Death of the Old Right," *Rothbard-Rockwell Report* September 1990. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard25.html>

357 Radosh, "The Myth of the New Deal," op.cit., p. 167.

358 Richman, "New Deal Nemesis," op.cit., p. 211.

1928 Democratic presidential candidate. Sheldon Richman reports that “Raskob, a good friend and fellow Catholic of Al Smith, did the bulk of the early organizing and thinking about the League.”³⁵⁹

There were serious opponents of the New Deal in the GOP, too, of course. But, despite Rothbard’s preposterous claim that they were “the soul of the [Republican] party,” and represented “majority sentiment in the party,” the fact is far otherwise. Rothbard seems actually to have believed that the only reason the so-called “Old Right Republicans” perennially “managed to lose the presidential nomination” is that said nomination was “perpetually stolen from them by the Eastern Establishment-Big Banker-Rockefeller wing of the party,” which relied on “media clout, as well as hardball banker threats to call in the delegates’ loans.” He seems actually to have believed that “Senator [Robert A.] Taft [of Ohio] was robbed of the Republican nomination in 1952” in precisely this way—“by a Rockefeller-Morgan Eastern banker cabal, using their control of respectable ‘Republican’ media.”³⁶⁰ But if the “Eastern Establishment-Big Banker-Rockefeller wing of the party” was so powerful, why was it never able to put its own man, Nelson Rockefeller, in the White House—or even win him the GOP nomination? It’s not as though he didn’t try for it time and again. The fact is that, as Clyde Wilson puts it, the “Old Right” members of the Republican party simply “never had sufficient strength” within the party “to nominate a presidential candidate or prevent very many evils.”³⁶¹

VII

The Goldwater Anomaly

The fact is that the coming of the New Deal ended a long era in American political history—an era that had endured for more than a hundred years, an era in which every national election was a contest between a liberal party and a conservative party, both substantial in size and influence.

359 Sheldon Richman, “A Matter of Degree, Not Principle: The Founding of the American Liberty League.” *Journal of Libertarian Studies* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 146-147.

360 Rothbard, “Life in the Old Right,” op.cit.

361 Clyde Wilson, “Save America! Vote Republican!” 30 September 2003. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/wilson/wilson14.html>

After the coming of the New Deal, both major parties were conservative parties. For the New Deal variety of “liberalism” was not liberalism at all, but conservatism. As Karl Hess explains it, the modern

liberal position has come to be known as a left-wing position. Actually, it lies right alongside the conservative tradition, down toward the middle of the line, but decidedly, I think, to the right of its center. Liberals believe in concentrated power—in the hands of liberals, the supposedly educated and genteel elite. They believe in concentrating that power as heavily and effectively as possible. They believe in great size of enterprise, whether corporate or political, and have a great and profound disdain for the homely and the local. They think nationally but they also think globally and now even intergalactically. Actually, because they believe in far more authoritarian rule than a lot of conservatives, it probably would be best to say that [modern] liberals lie next to but actually to the *right* of many conservatives.”³⁶²

The GOP had always been a conservative party, of course. The traditionally liberal Democratic party was now controlled by conservatives who falsely called themselves “liberals.” True liberals could find no proper home in either of these parties. They could either support minor parties or stay home from the polls altogether. Not surprisingly, a number of liberals chose what appeared to be a promising third alternative—working for liberal goals and ideals within one or the other of the two big conservative parties. But their efforts were doomed to failure. As George Wallace famously observed in 1968 there isn’t “a dime’s worth of difference” between the two parties.³⁶³ Neither of them is genuinely open to liberal ideas. But at least the liberals who chose to stick with the Democratic party could point out in defense of their choice that their party did have a long history of advancing liberal goals and ideals. The liberals who chose to stick with the GOP could offer no such defense, for the Republican party had never stood for anything but illiberal goals and ideals—big government and special favors for big business.

The Republican who “robbed” Robert Taft in 1952 and held the White House for the next eight years was, of course, Dwight D. Eisenhower, a politically undefeatable war hero and a thoroughly traditional Republican without a liberal bone in his body. As president, he smilingly accepted the New Deal and cheerfully added to it, increasing

³⁶² Hess, *Dear America*, op.cit., p. 13.

³⁶³ See Richard Pearson, “Former Alabama Governor George C. Wallace Dies.” *Washington Post* 14 September 1998. Online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/sept98/wallace.htm>

federal spending by thirty percent (though the nation was at peace); creating the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; expanding the Social Security system to include an additional ten million recipients; and meddling relentlessly in other nations' affairs. Eisenhower helped install Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah in Iran and sent the first American troops to a previously obscure corner of Southeast Asia known as Vietnam.³⁶⁴

When Eisenhower's vice president, a conservative lawyer from Southern California named Richard Milhous Nixon, lost the White House back to the Democrats in 1960, the political strategists within the Republican party began casting about for a more attractive candidate for 1964. The man they ultimately settled on, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, persuaded a great many people during 1963 and 1964 that the disaffected liberals who had left the Democratic party in 1932 in protest against the policies of FDR and then stuck with the GOP over the next quarter-century had been right all along. For here, at last, was a Republican presidential candidate who preached small government and free trade, a Republican who was eerily reminiscent of Grover Cleveland, a Republican who was eloquent in his espousal of old-time liberal goals and ideals.

The eloquence was chiefly the doing of Goldwater's speechwriter and principal adviser during the 1964 campaign, the journalist and political ghostwriter Karl Hess. As Hess tells it, Senator Goldwater really was what he seemed to so many—a genuine modern incarnation of the classical liberal spirit. There was the problem of the war in Vietnam, of course, but setting that aside for the moment, wasn't it abundantly clear that Goldwater was a true individualist and more a man of the Left than of the Right?

"Goldwater," Hess recalled in his autobiography, written thirty years after the Arizona senator's tragic presidential campaign, "had very little support from big business." The problem was that Goldwater's

insistence on competition as indispensable to a free market had scared the huge corporations. These giants of free enterprise had become addicted over the years to collusion with the government and to the sheltering protection of government regulations which hampered market entry and produced excessive restrictions against innovative products. Too many of them were used to government's helping hand in what amounted to welfare programs disguised as redundant and

³⁶⁴ See James Ostrowski, "Republicans and Big Government." 19 February 2002. Online at <http://www.mises.org/story/895>

unquestioned defense appropriations. Goldwater was suspicious of all that. He did not feel that a corporation should be subsidized with funds coerced from working people—any more than he believed that an artist or a scholar or a farmer should be. The support of big business flowed naturally to Lyndon Johnson, who knew how to wheel and deal with corporations that felt they had the right to be treated as virtually a fourth branch of government.

Goldwater, according to Hess, was a sincere opponent of big government. “It now is difficult to imagine a president of the United States actually turning back federal power,” Hess wrote in the early 1990s. “Goldwater, if elected, would have tried. He wrote to me some years back that ‘I am more of a Jeffersonian than a Republican or anything else. In fact, I think he was one of the greatest men who lived in America. If we could pay more attention to his preachments and his philosophy, I think the country would be a lot better off.’”³⁶⁵

Hess reports that Goldwater “never could understand the anti-marijuana law since cowboys in Arizona, before the Harrison Narcotics Act, smoked it regularly and were never more peaceable than when they were doing it.”³⁶⁶ Nor was marijuana the only issue on which the Arizona senator took the same position as the New Left activists who were making so much noise on college campuses around the country. In 1968, running to regain his old seat in the Senate, Goldwater began a speech at Arizona State University in Tempe by saying, “I have much in common with the anarchist wing of Students for a Democratic Society [SDS].”³⁶⁷

By this time, though he still worked part time for Goldwater—writing a book about the presidential campaign, writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column that appeared under Goldwater’s name, and writing speeches for Goldwater’s 1968 Senate campaign—Hess was having more and more direct contact with SDS himself. Very shortly he would abandon the Republican party altogether and begin publicly identifying with the New Left. Looking back on that period a few years later, in 1975, Hess noted that “very many of the young people I have known on the left got there, as I did, from the Goldwater campaign of

365 Karl Hess, *Mostly on the Edge: An Autobiography*, ed. Karl Hess, Jr. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1999), pp. 183-184, 181.

366 There is some historical confusion in this passage, though whether the confusion was Goldwater’s or Hess’s is hard to say. Marijuana was not forbidden by the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914. It was not forbidden or even regulated under federal law (though it was in certain states and municipalities) until nearly twenty-five years later, with the passage of the Marihuana Tax Act in 1937.

367 Hess, *Mostly on the Edge*, op.cit., p. 179.

1964.” Writing nearly a quarter-century before Goldwater’s death in 1998 (he himself died in 1994), Hess opined that “Goldwater [...] knows that, historically, he is not right. He is a man, deep down, of at least a leaning toward the humanist left.”³⁶⁸

Nor is Hess the only observer to see Goldwater as a liberal, a man of the Left, incongruously attached to a political party with which, ideologically, he had nothing in common. In 2004, six years after Goldwater’s death at 89, journalist Sidney Blumenthal reflected on the famous Arizonan’s legacy in a piece for the online magazine *Salon*. “In his plainspoken manner,” Blumenthal wrote, “indifferent to what anyone else thought, he railed against the right’s intolerance, sanctimony and bullying. Mr. Conservative, author of its early seminal manifesto, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, took to calling himself in public a ‘liberal.’ He spared no words in denouncing the right as the enemy of liberty.”

Blumenthal found that the people who had been closest to the senator in life were the most likely to agree with his assessment of Goldwater as a man of the Left.

“Barry was always a social liberal,” Susan Goldwater Levine, his widow, keeper of the flame, told me at her home, high in the hills above Phoenix, watching a pastel sunset, in 70 degree winter weather. “Barry believed that people should be allowed to do whatever they wanted in their own homes.” When Goldwater observed the right trying to use government to enforce private morality, he spoke up for women’s right to abortion and for gay rights. His wife insisted that his convictions had remained unaltered, but that the movement for which he was the avatar had become warped. “He hated it that the right-wing zealots took over the party,” she said. “Barry hated the right wing.”³⁶⁹

In fact, from the very beginning of his national political career in the early 1960s, Goldwater enjoyed a certain popularity among elements within the Democratic party and also among disgruntled Democrats no longer affiliated with the party. Clyde Wilson believes that so unlikely a candidate as Goldwater was able to win the GOP nomination in the first place “mainly because of the influx of expelled Democrats,” and he points out that “the only states he [Goldwater] carried [in the ’64 election] were traditionally Democratic ones.”³⁷⁰

368 Hess, *Dear America*, op.cit., pp. 108, 105.

369 Sidney Blumenthal, “Revolt of the Goldwater Conservatives.” *Salon* 26 February 2004. Online at <http://www.salon.com/opinion/blumenthal/2004/02/26/goldwater/>

370 Wilson, “Save America! Vote Republican!” op.cit.

There can be no question that Goldwater's own party, the GOP, abandoned his candidacy. Republicans stayed home from the polls or defected in droves to support the Johnson campaign. Why would they support a man like Goldwater? As Republicans, they could hardly be expected to show much enthusiasm for what was, essentially, a liberal program. Johnson was much more up their alley, with his long history as a New Deal "liberal," i.e., a partisan of the mercantilist, proto-fascist corporate State.

On the other hand, there was another way of looking at Barry Goldwater. And Murray Rothbard was far and away the most articulate champion of this alternative point of view. "Goldwater," he wrote in 1980, "was—and is—an all-out interventionist in foreign affairs; it is both symbolic and significant that Goldwater was an Eisenhower, not a Taft delegate to the 1952 Republican convention." A mere eight years later, by the time of "the 1960 GOP convention, Barry Goldwater had become the political leader of the transformed New Right." This "New Right," Rothbard explains, was the brand of conservatism for which William F. Buckley, Jr.'s *National Review* provided the intellectual leadership, a brand of conservatism that "combined a traditionalist and theocratic approach to 'moral values,' occasional lip service to free-market economics, and an imperialist and global interventionist foreign policy dedicated to the glorification of the American state and the extirpation of world Communism. Classical liberalism remained only as rhetoric, useful in attracting business support [...]"³⁷¹

And even Hess acknowledges, albeit grudgingly, the truth of one part of Rothbard's complaint against Goldwater—the contention that the Arizona senator was "an all-out interventionist in foreign affairs." In 1975 Hess wrote that

[t]o advocate a strong national-security state, as Goldwater always did, while at the same time facing the fact that one of its consequences—increased federal power—would accomplish in the long run just what an enemy invasion would, is to engage in a great contradiction. I certainly didn't see it at the time. Goldwater didn't seem to see it. It was never discussed. But it was the sort of contradiction which can haunt you for a long time. It did me—a long time later.

Meanwhile, the weight of this contradiction was making itself felt more and more with each passing day, because of its relevance to one of the dominant issues of the day,

³⁷¹ Rothbard, "Requiem for the Old Right." op.cit.

the Indo-Chinese war. As it grew and as his support for it grew, it contrasted sharply with, for instance, his very first 1964 campaign pledge to repeal and end the draft. He said very often that if there was a war that people didn't want to fight, you probably shouldn't fight it at all. The Indo-Chinese war, begun as an executive action, expanded as an executive action, was fought with draftees. It was not a war that people even knew existed until too late. It was a war that contradicted every basic principle I had thought Senator Goldwater stood for.³⁷²

In 1968, when the GOP finally recaptured the White House, the victorious candidate was the garden variety Republican statist, Richard Nixon. And over the next eight years, he and his Republican successor, Gerald R. Ford, provided a steady flow of traditional conservative policymaking. Nixon alone increased federal spending seventy percent. He created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), three of the most voracious and meddlesome bureaucracies in the federal government. Nixon started "affirmative action," imposed wage and price controls, and proposed a government-guaranteed and taxpayer-funded minimum personal income. Altogether he managed to make your 1968 dollar worth just seventy-eight cents by the time he left office. Ford was in office for a much shorter time than Nixon, but he was in office long enough to erode the dollar by another eight cents. And he managed to steadily increase spending throughout his time in office.

Ford lost his bid for re-election in 1976, and another Democrat, former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter, entered the White House for a term. Thereafter, from 1980 to 1992, the GOP held the presidency: twelve years—eight of Ronald Reagan, followed by four of his former vice president, George Herbert Walker Bush.

VIII

The Reagan Fraud—and After

Like most Republican politicians since the early 1930s, Reagan always portrayed himself throughout his political career as a champion of limited government, individual rights, and free enterprise—the classical *lib-*

³⁷² Hess, *Dear America*, op.cit., pp. 68-69.

eral values which, of course, he absurdly described as “conservative.” But, like almost all Republican politicians since the early 1930s, he seemed to forget all about these values once he got into office and assumed the reins of power. Consider, as a case in point, Reagan’s eight years (1966–1974) as governor of California. As Murray Rothbard noted in 1980,

Despite his bravado about having stopped the growth of state government, the actual story is that the California budget grew by 122 percent during his eight years as governor, not much of an improvement on the growth rate of 130 percent during the preceding two terms of free-spending liberal Pat Brown. The state bureaucracy increased during Reagan’s administration from 158,000 to 192,000, a rise of nearly 22 percent—hardly squaring with Reagan’s boast of having “stopped the bureaucracy cold.”

Nor “is Reagan’s record on taxes any comfort. He started off with a bang by increasing state taxes nearly \$1 billion in his first year in office—the biggest tax increase in California history. Income, sales, corporate, bank, liquor, and cigarette taxes were all boosted dramatically.” After his re-election as governor in 1970, “[t]wo more tax hikes—in 1971 and 1972—raised revenues by another \$500 million and \$700 million respectively.” Overall, “[b]y the end of Reagan’s eight years, state income taxes had nearly tripled, from a bite of \$7.68 per \$1000 of personal income to \$19.48. During his administration, California rose in a ranking of the states from twentieth to thirteenth in personal income tax collection per capita, and it rose from fourth to first in per capita revenue from corporate income taxes.”

During his 1970 campaign for re-election, Reagan assured voters that his feet were set “in concrete” against adopting payroll withholding of state income tax in California. Less than a year later he was joking that “I can hear the concrete cracking around my feet,” as he signed exactly that provision into law.

According to Rothbard, Reagan “created seventy-three new state government councils and commissions, with a total budget, in his last year alone, of \$12 million. Included was the California Energy Commission, which put the state hip-deep into the energy business” and created a regulatory climate under which a three-year review process was required before any new power plant could be constructed in the state..

Reagan always claimed to have “reformed” welfare in California during his years in the governor’s office. And, as Rothbard noted in 1980, he did remove “more than 510,000 from the welfare rolls by—among other things—forcing adults to support their welfare parents.”

The problem is that “[h]e then turned around and boosted the amount of welfare paid to those remaining by 43 percent, so that total welfare costs to the taxpayer didn’t decline at all.”³⁷³

In 1974, his time in Sacramento at an end, Reagan began running for president. And by the fall of 1980 he had succeeded in winning both the Republican nomination and then the election campaign against the incumbent, Jimmy Carter. In January 1981, he was called upon to deliver his first inaugural address. “For decades,” he told Americans,

“we have piled deficit upon deficit, mortgaging our future and our children’s future for the temporary convenience of the present. To continue this long trend is to guarantee tremendous social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals. You and I, as individuals, can, by borrowing, live beyond our means, but for only a limited period of time. Why, then, should we think that collectively, as a nation, we are not bound by that same limitation? We must act today in order to preserve tomorrow. And let there be no misunderstanding—we are going to begin to act, beginning today.”

“It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment,” Reagan thundered. “It is time to [...] get government back within its means, and to lighten our punitive tax burden. And these will be our first priorities, and on these principles, there will be no compromise.”

But in fact both taxes and deficits increased under Reagan. As Rothbard put it in a 1988 retrospective on Reagan’s years in the White House,

In the first place, the famous “tax cut” of 1981 did not cut taxes at all. It’s true that tax rates for higher-income brackets were cut; but for the average person, taxes rose, rather than declined. The reason is that, on the whole, the cut in income tax rates was more than offset by two forms of tax increase. One was “bracket creep,” a term for inflation quietly but effectively raising one into higher tax brackets, so that you pay more and proportionately higher taxes *even though* the tax rate schedule has officially remained the same. The second source of higher taxes was Social Security taxation, which kept increasing, and which helped taxes go up overall.

Moreover, in each of the seven years that followed that phony “tax cut,” taxes increased

with the approval of the Reagan administration. But to save the president’s rhetorical sensibilities, they weren’t *called* tax increases. Instead,

³⁷³ Murray N. Rothbard, “The Two Faces of Ronald Reagan” (1980). Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard50.html>

ingenious labels were attached to them; raising of “fees,” “plugging loopholes” (and surely everyone wants loopholes plugged), “tightening IRS enforcement,” and even “revenue enhancements.” I am sure that all good Reaganomists slept soundly at night knowing that even though government revenue was being “enhanced,” the president had held the line against tax increases.³⁷⁴

As for deficits, *Slate*'s Timothy Noah puts the matter succinctly: “The deficit, which stood at \$74 billion in Carter’s final year, ballooned to \$155 billion in Reagan’s final year. In the words of Vice President Dick Cheney, ‘Reagan taught us deficits don’t matter.’”³⁷⁵ In the words of syndicated columnist Molly Ivins, “Ronald Reagan came into office in 1980 on the mantra that he would rid the nation of Waste, Fraud and Abuse. He proceeded to raise the national deficit by \$2 trillion with tax cuts and spending on the military in the face of a collapsing Soviet Union.”³⁷⁶

Then there was Reagan’s policy on international trade. “Our trade policy,” he stated during his 1980 campaign, “rests firmly on the foundation of free and open markets. I recognize. . . the inescapable conclusion that all of history has taught: the freer the flow of world trade, the stronger the tides of human progress and peace among nations.” Then, as president, he acted as though such ideas had never entered his mind. According to Sheldon Richman, Reagan “imposed a one hundred percent tariff on selected Japanese electronic products,” explaining that he did so “to enforce the principles of free and fair trade.” As president he “forced Japan to accept restraints on auto exports”; “tightened considerably the quotas on imported sugar”; “required eighteen countries, including Brazil, Spain, South Korea, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, Finland, Australia, and the European Community, to accept ‘voluntary restraint agreements’ that reduced their steel imports to the United States”; “imposed a forty-five percent duty on Japanese motorcycles for the benefit of Harley Davidson, which admitted that superior Japanese management was the cause of its problems”; “pressed Japan to force its automakers to buy more American-made parts”; “demanded that Taiwan, West Germany, Japan, and Switzerland restrain their exports of machine tools”; “extended quotas on imported clothes pins”; and “beefed-up the

374 Murray N. Rothbard, “The Myths of Reaganomics” (1988). Online at <http://www.mises.org/fullstory.asp?control=1544>

375 Timothy Noah, “Ronald Reagan, Party Animal.” *Slate* 5 June 2004. Online at <http://slate.msn.com/id/2101829/>

376 Molly Ivins, “Baghdad on the Bayou.” 28 September 2005. Online at http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/092905D.shtml

Export-Import Bank, an institution dedicated to distorting the American economy at the expense of the American people in order to artificially promote exports of eight large corporations.” By the time Reagan left office, at least twenty-five percent of all imports were restricted, “a one hundred percent increase over 1980.” As Reagan’s Treasury Secretary, James A. Baker, put it, Reagan “granted more import relief to U.S. industry than any of his predecessors in more than half a century.”³⁷⁷

Then there was draft registration. In 1979, Reagan told *Human Events* that conscription “rests on the assumption that your kids belong to the state. If we buy that assumption then it is for the state—not for parents, the community, the religious institutions or teachers—to decide who shall have what values and who shall do what work, when, where and how in our society. That assumption isn’t a new one. The Nazis thought it was a great idea.” A year later, he promised voters to end compulsory draft registration, which had been resurrected by President Jimmy Carter. Yet, as Murray Rothbard noted in a 1984 appraisal of Reagan’s first term, “compulsory draft registration has been continued, and young resisters have been thrown into jail.”

“Reagan,” Rothbard wrote, “has been a master at engineering an enormous gap between his rhetoric and the reality of his actions. All politicians, of course, have such a gap, but in Reagan it is cosmic, massive, as wide as the Pacific Ocean. His soft-soapy voice appears perfectly sincere as he spouts the rhetoric which he violates day-by-day.”³⁷⁸

“Wherever we look,” Rothbard wrote four years later, as Reagan left office for the last time, “on the budget, in the domestic economy, or in foreign trade or international monetary relations, we see government even more on our backs than ever. The burden and the scope of government intervention under Reagan has increased, not decreased. Reagan’s *rhetoric* has been calling for reductions of government; his actions have been precisely the reverse.”³⁷⁹

During his eight years in office, Ronald Reagan increased federal spending by fifty-three percent, added a quarter of a million new civilian government employees, escalated the War on Drugs, created the “drug czar’s office,” and lowered the value of your 1980 dollar to seventy-three cents. His Republican successor, George Herbert Walker Bush, further

377 Sheldon Richman, “Ronald Reagan, Protectionist.” Online at http://www.mises.org/freemarket_detail.asp?control=489

378 Murray N. Rothbard, “The Reagan Phenomenon” (1984). Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard49.html>

379 Rothbard, “The Myths of Reaganomics,” op.cit.

increased taxes, further increased federal spending and “managed to knock thirteen cents off the value of your dollar in just four years.”

It will be objected that Democratic presidents like Johnson and Carter also grew the federal government, that they too increased taxes and spending and regulations, that they too made government steadily more intrusive and the individual steadily less free. It will be objected that the Republican party is here being singled out for undeserved abuse. But in fact, the situation is far otherwise. As James Ostrowski noted in 2002, “Over the last one hundred years, of the five presidents who presided over the largest domestic spending increases, four were Republicans. Include regulations and foreign policy, as well as budgets approved by a Republican Congress, and a picture begins to emerge of the Republican Party as a reliable engine of government growth.”³⁸⁰

In fact, despite the liberal apostasy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and virtually all Democratic politicians since his time, despite their choice to try to beat the Republicans at their own game, promoting mercantilism, welfare statism, and war, and calling it “liberalism”—despite all this, the conservative party, the GOP, remains the more devoted to mercantilism, welfare statism, and war of the two major parties. Throughout the '70s and '80s, Republicans depicted the philosophy of their Democratic opponents as “tax and spend, tax and spend.” But in fact, it is the Republicans, the conservatives, who are the biggest taxers and the biggest spenders of all.

The years since George Herbert Walker Bush have seen nothing that might make one wish to revise or soften this statement—for George H. W. Bush’s son, former Texas governor George W. Bush, who won the presidency in a hotly contested election in the year 2000 and was reelected in 2004, had spent more federal money by the end of his third year in office than Bill Clinton, the “tax and spend” Democrat who preceded him, managed to spend in a full eight years. Nor should this seem surprising. Princeton University historian Sean Wilentz noted late in 2005 that “many of contemporary conservatism’s central ideas and slogans renovate old Whig appeals,” and that “the [George W.] Bush administration’s political and ideological recipe was invented [...] by a nearly forgotten American institution: the Whig Party of the 1830’s and 40’s.”³⁸¹

380 Ostrowski, “Republicans and Big Government,” op.cit.

381 Sean Wilentz, “Reconsideration: Bush’s Ancestors.” *New York Times Magazine* 16 October 2005. Online at <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F60E13FC3D5BOC758DDDA90994DD404482>

Thus, “[d]espite occasional exceptions,” wrote columnist Doug Bandow, fewer than three years into George W. Bush’s first term in office, the Bush administration, backed by the Republican-controlled Congress, has been promoting larger government at almost every turn. Its spending policies have been irresponsible, and its trade strategies have been destructive. The president has been quite willing to sell out the national interest for perceived political gain, whether the votes sought are from seniors or farmers. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 encouraged the administration to push into law civil-liberties restrictions that should worry anyone, whether they are wielded by a Bush or a Clinton administration.³⁸²

Journalist Steven Greenhut agreed. “This president,” he wrote, late in 2003, “has not vetoed a single bill, which means he has signed into law every big-spending project that has come down the pike. Federal spending, even on non-military matters, has soared. His nation-building experiments are downright Wilsonian, a far cry from the ‘humbler’ foreign policy he promised when he ran for office.”

Greenhut hastened to add, lest anyone get the wrong idea, that [t]hese are criticisms from the right, so save the “you stinking Democrat-loving pinko” e-mails for someone else. I argued for libertarians to vote for Bush in a column before the election, believing that his calls for limited government and restrained foreign policy were far superior to Al Gore’s quasi-socialism, nutty environmentalism and love of Clinton-style nation-building.³⁸³

It is clear that Greenhut considers himself a man of the Right. It is also clear that he considers himself an advocate of smaller government, a “humbler foreign policy,” and the sort of environmentalism that acknowledges the human animal’s rightful place in nature. Yet these values and goals are *liberal* values and goals. They are the historic values and goals of the Left, not the Right.

This is why any libertarians who read Greenhut’s pre-election arguments for Bush would almost certainly have rejected them as unsound. If they were libertarians—i.e., classical liberals—and if their historical understanding of American politics went back any more than half a century, they knew that it was scarcely possible for a libertarian to support a Republican. The Republicans are and have always been the party of big, mercantilist government and an aggressive, meddlesome foreign

382 Quoted in Steven Greenhut, “Mr. Right?” *Orange County* (Calif.) *Register* 7 December 2003. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/ocregister/mr-right.html>

383 Ibid.

policy—exactly what liberals (libertarians) have historically opposed. It is “by focussing on the history of the nineteenth century,” Murray Rothbard wrote, that “we learn of the true origins of the various ‘isms’ of our day, as well as the illogical and mythical nature of the attempted ‘conservative-libertarian’ fusion.”

How, Rothbard wondered, could a libertarian consider himself a man or woman of the Right, when “[e]verywhere on the Right the ‘open society’ is condemned, and a coerced morality affirmed. God is supposed to be put back into government. Free speech is treated with suspicion and distrust, and the military are hailed as the greatest patriots, and conscription strongly upheld. Western imperialism is trumpeted as the proper way to deal with backward peoples [...]” It is striking how contemporary this sounds, for a passage that was written more than forty years ago. It is striking how well the words of conservative leader William F. Buckley, Jr., quoted by Rothbard, still serve to capture the essence of the American Right wing in our own time: “Where reconciliation of an individual’s and the government’s interests cannot be achieved, the interests of the government shall be given exclusive consideration.”³⁸⁴

The GOP is the conservative party in American politics, the party that since Lincoln (and Henry Clay and Alexander Hamilton before him) has stood for mercantilism, welfare statism, and war. Libertarians are *not* conservatives; they are *not* on the Right. They are on the Left, the last remnant of the original liberals. Though some true liberals remain in the Democratic Party of today, almost all of them have made the error of pursuing liberal goals by conservative means. And the majority in the party has been New Deal liberal—false liberal, conservative in liberal’s clothing—since the 1930s. In effect, the United States is now governed by one or the other of two conservative parties.

To understand that this is so, to understand the history that explains why it is so, is to understand that all the historical revisionists discussed in this book were on the Left, not the Right. The Progressive Historians, the New Left Historians and the Libertarian Historians are all growing on branches of the same Leftist tree, for Leftists are champions of the individual. The liberal Progressives, typified in the historical profession by revisionist Harry Elmer Barnes, made the error of pursuing liberal goals by conservative means, but they did have liberal goals; unlike most of their Progressive colleagues, they were men of the Left. Most of the liberals in the New Left have made the same

³⁸⁴ Rothbard, “The Transformation of the American Right,” op.cit.

error, generally in a quixotic, Saint-Simonian quest for “equality,” but they too are authentic men of the Left. And, of course, the Libertarians represent, as Murray Bookchin said, “the real legacy of the left.”

It is this not-always-consistent but ever-present concern for the individual that led all the revisionists discussed in this book to investigate (their critics would say to fixate upon) the particular issues and events they investigated. The U.S. Civil War, World Wars I and II, the Cold War—liberals hate war because war, especially since the mid-19th Century, has killed millions of innocent civilians and destroyed their hard-earned property. Where conservatives see “collateral damage,” liberals see individuals whose natural right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” has been abrogated. Where conservatives see noble crusades in defense of the True and the Good, liberals more often see brazen schemes to expand government, reward favored industries (“defense” contractors), and steadily reduce the ordinary taxpayer’s wealth as well as his or her sphere of personal liberty. This is the left liberal revisionist view of American history.

SIX

THE NEW AMERICAN HISTORY WARS

I

Why Textbooks Matter

IN the American Chronicle novels of Gore Vidal, the left liberal revisionist view of American history has achieved a major breakthrough into the American cultural mainstream. But this is far from its only important victory in recent years. It has also made its way into the textbooks that American high school and college students are required to read when they take courses in American history.

And the importance of this last achievement can scarcely be overestimated. For, as Gary J. Kornblith and Carol Lasser note in a recent report in *The Journal of American History*, “most teachers of United States history survey courses assign a textbook as core reading, and many assign only a textbook. [...] American history textbooks shape how American college students encounter their nation’s history and their society’s cultural heritage.”³⁸⁵ It has long been thus—and not only for college students. According to Frances FitzGerald,

[i]n the nineteenth century, a heavy reliance on textbooks was the distinguishing mark of American education; it was called “the American system” by Europeans. The texts were substitutes for well-trained teachers; in some parts of the country, they constituted the whole of a school’s library and the only books a child would ever read on the subject of, say, American history.³⁸⁶

385 Gary J. Kornblith and Carol Lasser, “‘The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth’: Writing, Producing, and Using College-Level American History Textbooks.” *Journal of American History* Vol. 91, No. 4, March 2005, p. 1380.

386 Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980 [1979]), p. 19.

More than a hundred years later, the story is little changed. As of 2003, according to Diane Ravitch,

[t]extbooks are very important in American schools, especially in history. In most history classes, they *are* the curriculum. Many teachers are dependent on their textbook because they have not studied history. Today, most teachers of history in grades 7–12 have neither a major nor a minor in history. Instead they have a degree in social studies education, some other branch of pedagogy, a social science, or a completely unrelated field.³⁸⁷

Early in 2005, Sam Wineburg, a Stanford University education professor and author of the book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (2001), reported in the *Los Angeles Times* that “[n]early a third of the students who apply to Stanford’s master’s in teaching program to become history teachers have never taken a single college course in history.” Nor is this at all out of the ordinary, for “[a]mong high school history teachers across the country, only 18% have majored (*or even minored*) in the subject they now teach.”³⁸⁸

For most students of history in public secondary schools in this country, then, the implications seem straightforward: “what they are taught will be the material in the textbook.”³⁸⁹ A chance to influence what appears in that textbook is, accordingly, a prize of great moment to all those who seek to hale their particular truth before the court of public opinion. And consequently, the history of American history textbooks in American public schools has been a history of controversy and struggle for advantage—not from the very beginning, perhaps, but certainly from the time when public secondary schools first became an important force in American education.

That time was the 1890s. “Before then,” as Frances FitzGerald notes, “American history was not very widely taught. The public grade schools had very little history of any kind in their curricula, and the private academies that prepared students for colleges and universities concentrated on classical studies and European history.” But as the “Gay Nineties” dawned, the “public high schools” for the first time actually “had

387 Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Knopf, 2003), p. 140.

388 Sam Wineburg, “Shouldn’t Teachers of History Have Majored in History?” *Los Angeles Times*. 24 February 2005. Online at <http://hnn.us/roundup/comments/10444.html> [emphasis added]

389 Ravitch, *op.cit.*, p. 140.

more students than the private academies.”³⁹⁰ And the question of what was written in the history textbooks used by those public high schools therefore began to interest a great many people who had heretofore invested little or no thought in such matters.

By 1897, according to Jonathan Zimmerman, the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans’ organization for soldiers who had fought in the Union Army during the U.S. Civil War, had formed a “school history committee” and had begun issuing calls “for a unified schoolbook that would bind [all sections of the country] together.” At around the same time, the history committee of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) made a similar demand.

“There shall not be one history for Massachusetts and another for South Carolina,” declared the Mississippi war hero Stephen D. Lee, chair of the UCV’s history committee, “but Americans everywhere shall read the same books.” The following year Lee predicted that the Spanish-American War would link North and South “at home”—that is, in their textbooks—as well as “on the field of battle.”³⁹¹

By the 1920s, these newly interested observers, along with a horde of others, had begun reaching some tentative conclusions about the specific textbooks they’d been studying, and they had begun taking their specific grievances public—with a vengeance. In 1927, Chicago Mayor William “Big Bill” Thompson convened “a dismissal hearing for Superintendent William McAndrew, whom Thompson accused of imposing ‘treasonous’ and ‘un-American’ texts on the schools.” Thompson made these history textbooks—“texts by Charles Beard, David Muzzey, and other leading scholars”—the centerpiece of his public case against McAndrew. Nor was Chicago the only venue in which protests against Beard and Muzzey were mounted during the ’20s. They raged nationwide, “from Boston and Baltimore to Seattle and San Francisco.”³⁹²

What the protesters found so objectionable about Beard’s and Muzzey’s texts was their unduly “pro-English” character. Zimmerman notes that the movement against these books “drew most of its support from Irish and German immigrants,” neither of whom would have been too keen on any book that portrayed the English too favorably.³⁹³ And there can be little question that this is precisely what many of these books

390 FitzGerald, *op.cit.*, pp. 48, 50.

391 Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 35.

392 *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 1.

393 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

did. David Muzzey was a student of James Harvey Robinson of Columbia University, whom we first met in Chapter 2 in his capacity as one of the founders of the New History, the first revisionist movement in American historiography. Muzzey took Robinson's ideas to heart and, under their guidance, created a high school American history textbook, *An American History*, which, as Frances FitzGerald points out, "survived for sixty-five years, selling more copies for much of that time than any of its competitors—and in certain periods more than all of them combined—and proving almost as popular in the days of the jet aircraft as in those of the horse-drawn carriage." According to FitzGerald, "[f]or nearly half the [20th] century, a high percentage—perhaps even a majority—of American schoolchildren learned American history" from Muzzey's book.³⁹⁴ And those who didn't likely learned it from one of Muzzey's many imitators.

These texts, FitzGerald argues, placed enormous emphasis on "the English ancestry of Americans. In their discussions of exploration and colonization, they gave far greater space and approval to Sir Francis Drake than to any of the other explorers except Columbus, and they concentrated on the English colonists to the near-exclusion of the French, the Spanish, and the Dutch." In general, these books "viewed the Colonies as extensions of England into the New World," and they ended with "acclaim" for "the American entry into the First World War on the side of the British."³⁹⁵ Muzzey insisted that there were two sides to the American Revolution. According to Zimmerman, the original edition of *An American History* described "Stamp Act demonstrators as a 'mob' and [...] the Boston Massacre's victims as 'ruffians.'"³⁹⁶ More important—at least from the point of view of early-20th Century immigrant Americans from Ireland, Germany, and Southern and Eastern Europe—Muzzey and his imitators depicted all these non-English arrivals on our shores "as nothing more than a problem. [...] they gave no information about how these people lived, what they did, or where they came from, much less why they came."³⁹⁷ In a word, the non-English newcomers felt excluded.

Charles Beard's books were another matter entirely. The unduly pro-English material in Beard's books was more subtle, less overt than in Muzzey. Still, it was there. In his most famous and most successful textbook, *The Rise of American Civilization*, written in collaboration with his wife, Mary Beard, and published only a year before its pub-

394 FitzGerald, op.cit., p. 59.

395 Ibid., p. 77.

396 Zimmerman, op.cit., p. 19-20.

397 FitzGerald, op.cit., p. 78.

lic denunciation by Big Bill Thompson, he wrote that support for the newly minted U.S. Constitution in the 1780s

ran along economic lines. The merchants, manufacturers, private creditors, and holders of public securities loomed large among the advocates of the new system, while the opposition came chiefly from the small farmers behind the seaboard, especially from the men who, in earlier years, had demanded paper money and other apparatus for easing the strain of their debts.³⁹⁸

But this might put in children's heads the notion that the Founding Fathers had masterminded a revolution and created a new government, not because of the intolerable tyranny of George III and the sanctity of individual rights, but in order to make a profit. And if the children somehow got that idea in their heads, it would be a small and easy step for them to an unduly pro-English attitude.

"It is true," the Beards wrote in 1927,

that one branch of American mythology represents the second war with England [the War of 1812] as springing inevitably from her depredations on American trade and her impressment of American seamen, but the evidence in the case does not exactly support that view. Northern shipowners, upon whom the losses fell with special weight, did not ask for armed intervention. On the contrary, they took great pains to prove that the federal government's report listing thousands of impressment outrages was false and they were almost unanimous in their opposition to drawing the sword against England.

Diplomatic efforts might well have done the trick, the Beards argued, without the necessity for a costly war that included the destruction by fire of the nation's new capitol at Washington, D.C. "[I]t must be remembered," they wrote,

that two days after the United States declared war—before news of the event reached London—the British government withdrew its obnoxious Orders in Council, leaving only the impressment issue unsettled by parleys and diplomacy. If, as had been said, that alone was sufficient cause for war, the fact remained that the communities which suffered most from it did not so regard the matter.³⁹⁹

Perhaps worst of all, from the viewpoint of the protesters, the Beards questioned the originality of the Founding Fathers, whose "high doctrines," they declared,

398 Beard and Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, op.cit., Vol. I, pp. 332-333.
399 *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 410.

were essentially English, being derived [...] from the writings of John Locke, the philosopher who supplied the rhetorical defense mechanism for the Whig revolution of 1688 which ended in the expulsion of James II. In Locke's hands, the catechism of politics was short indeed: the aim of government is to protect property and when any government invades the privileges of property, the people have a right to alter or abolish the government and establish a new one. The idea was almost a century old when Jefferson artfully applied it in a modified form to the exigencies of the American Revolution.⁴⁰⁰

The Veterans of Foreign Wars were indignant. "The inspired men," they complained, "who startled the world with their new conception of human rights are charged with having plagiarized it all from England."⁴⁰¹

The protests and official inquiries into the unduly pro-British textbooks did have impact here and there. The historian Andrew C. McLaughlin was forced to change a sentence in his account of the battle of Bunker Hill, for example. His original, unduly pro-British sentence had read: "Three times the British returned courageously to the attack." His new sentence read: "Three times the cowardly British returned to the attack."⁴⁰² But by and large, the efforts of the reformers were not repaid with significant success. The first textbook activists to reach that milestone were to do so nearly twenty years later, during the war years of the early 1940s.

Back in 1917, a report issued by the National Education Association had suggested that secondary schools then in the habit of teaching "subjects such as history, geography, and economics" might consider an alternative proposal—"that the various disciplines be replaced by an integrated system of 'social studies,' in which the emphasis would shift from history to the social sciences and from the past to the present and the future."⁴⁰³ Far and away the most successful of the various writers and pedagogues who sought to transform this vision into reality was Harold Rugg, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, whose fourteen-volume series, *Man and His Changing Society*, began appearing in print in 1930. "Throughout the 1930s," Jonathan Zimmerman writes, "no American textbooks were more popular than the works of Harold Rugg." The publisher of *Man and His Changing Society* credited the series with "keeping [us] in the 'black' during the depression."⁴⁰⁴

400 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 240.

401 Zimmerman, op.cit., p. 58.

402 FitzGerald, op.cit., p. 35.

403 Ibid., p. 169.

404 Zimmerman, op.cit., p. 66.

Diane Ravitch notes that Rugg's "textbooks were read by millions of students in some five thousand schools across the country."⁴⁰⁵

Then the Advertising Federation of America, "which was offended by Rugg's disparaging remarks about advertising," launched a frontal assault on the series, circulating "brochures against the books" on a national basis.⁴⁰⁶ The American Legion soon followed suit, distributing a million copies of one polemic against Rugg's texts and "nearly half a million pamphlets reviling them" a year later.⁴⁰⁷

[T]hen the National Association of Manufacturers [...] and a columnist for the Hearst press joined in, calling the series Socialist or Communist propaganda. The charges caught on and spread to community groups across the country. Dr. Rugg went on an extensive lecture tour to defend the series, during which he announced publicly that he was neither a Communist nor a Socialist. But in vain. A number of school boards banned the books, and others simply took them out of circulation. In 1938, the Rugg books sold 289,000 copies; in 1944, they sold only 21,000 copies; not long afterward, they disappeared from the market altogether.⁴⁰⁸

Twenty more years were to pass before a comparable triumph was achieved by protesters bent on influencing the textbooks used in public schools. It was in 1962, Frances FitzGerald tells us, that the Detroit chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) petitioned the Detroit Board of Education, asking that a "history text, published by Laidlaw Brothers, [which] depicted slavery in a favorable light" be withdrawn "from the city school system."⁴⁰⁹ The NAACP had been protesting textbooks for thirty years at that point, ever since 1932, the year in which it established its first textbook committee and "called on local branches to examine their history, literature, and civics textbooks—and to protest the most offensive texts."⁴¹⁰ As FitzGerald notes, however, though "[t]he N.A.A.C.P. and other civil-rights organizations had denounced racial prejudice in the textbooks a number of times in prior years," they had had "no real effect."⁴¹¹

In 1962, the NAACP finally prevailed.

405 Ravitch, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

406 FitzGerald, *op.cit.*, p. 37. See also Zimmerman, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

407 Zimmerman, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

408 FitzGerald, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

409 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

410 Zimmerman, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

411 FitzGerald, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

[T]he Detroit board withdrew the text, and subsequently began to examine for racial bias all the history texts used in the school system. The Newark Textbook Council soon followed suit. The movement then spread to other big-city school systems and was taken up by organizations representing other racial and ethnic minority groups—Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, Asian-Americans, Armenian-Americans, and so on—all of whom claimed, with justice, to have been ignored or abused by the textbooks.

Then the new “movement,” as FitzGerald styles it, mushroomed.

Within a few years, a dozen organizations from the B’nai B’rith’s Anti-Defamation League to a new Council on Interracial Books, were studying texts for racial, ethnic, and religious bias and making recommendations for a new generation of texts. What began as a series of discrete protests against individual books became a general proposition: all texts had treated the United States as a white, middle-class society when it was in fact multiracial and multicultural.

The Detroit NAACP’s modest protest of 1962 had made what seemed like massive changes in the nation’s history textbooks, and it had wasted no time in doing so—“by the late sixties,” FitzGerald reminds us, the “general proposition” that “all texts” had shortchanged minorities had “come to be a truism for the educational establishment.”⁴¹²

And so it was that over the next few years “[d]ozens of states passed laws or resolutions requiring the study of American minorities, including Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans as well as African-Americans.” So it was that textbooks began devoting

far greater attention—and more accurate information—to blacks and other minorities. As recently as 1966 southern school districts had balked at the mere appearance of blacks in textbook illustrations. By the early 1980s, however, students across the country read about Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Textbooks also admitted an assortment of other ethnic luminaries, ranging from Pocahontas and Sacajawea to Roberto Clemente and Cesar Chavez.⁴¹³

The process of implementing these changes was never perfectly smooth, needless to say. Nor was it without moments of unintended hilarity. As of 1979, for example, according to Frances FitzGerald, textbook publishers were producing “guidelines for authors and editors on

⁴¹² Ibid., p. 39.

⁴¹³ Zimmerman, *op.cit.*, p. 126.

the treatment of racial and other minorities in the textbooks. These guidelines [...] give instructions on such things as the percentage of illustrations to be devoted to the various groups, and ways to avoid stereotyping in text or pictures.” For example,

A history book [...] would not sell in Texas if it did not have a good deal of material on Mexican-Americans, and it would not sell anywhere if it had pictures of minority-group members who were not aspiring people: pictures of black sharecroppers could not be used in order to illustrate Reconstruction; if blacks were pictured they had to be, say, technicians in lab coats.⁴¹⁴

Twenty years later, at the dawn of a new millennium, Diane Ravitch found very similar guidelines still very much in place in the offices of American textbook publishers. She quotes from a guideline published by McGraw-Hill advising illustrators researching historical photos to (in Ravitch’s words) “be on the watch for the following stereotyped images”:

Pioneer women doing domestic chores must be replaced by pioneer women chopping wood, using a plow, using firearms, and handling large animals.

Pioneer woman riding in a covered wagon as man walks must be replaced by both man and woman walking or both riding, or woman walking while man rides.

Women as passengers on a sailboat must be replaced by women hoisting the sails on a boat.

Women depicted as nurses, elementary school teachers, clerks, secretaries, tellers, and librarians must be replaced by women as doctors, professors, managers, police officers, sports figures, and construction workers, and by men as nurses, secretaries, and elementary school teachers.

It is useful to remember, at this point, that our only purpose in following such guidelines as these at all is to remedy the failure of traditional history textbooks to include the true history of women and minorities. For, as Diane Ravitch notes,

[s]ome of these replacements require writers and artists to tell lies about history. Until the latter decades of the twentieth century, most women who worked were in fact nurses, teachers, and secretaries; not many women were doctors, professors, managers, police officers, sports figures, and construction workers. To pretend otherwise is to falsify the past. It minimizes the barriers that women faced. It pre-

⁴¹⁴ FitzGerald, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

tends that the gender equality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was a customary condition in the past.⁴¹⁵

Then again, truth—fidelity to the past as best we can reconstruct it—has never been the chief goal of textbook writers. Frances FitzGerald notes that in the 1970s, it was the conventional wisdom among textbook publishers that “the inclusion of nasty information constitutes bias even if the information is true.”⁴¹⁶ As FitzGerald explains, “[h]istory textbooks for elementary and secondary schools [...] are written not to explore but to instruct—to tell children what their elders want them to know about their country. This information is not necessarily what anyone considers the truth of things.”⁴¹⁷ James J. Martin is more blunt: “If you mistake a zinc rainspout for a hollow tree,” he writes, “and you are a woodpecker, you have a fundamentally flawed conception of the total situation. The same thing can be said for those who think that school history books are primarily intended to assist the young in appreciating and understanding history.”⁴¹⁸ Public school history textbooks are meant to inculcate a certain general view of America in their student readers—a view that can be as well (perhaps better) served by a dose of myth as by a dose of truth. (Nor is this true only of American history textbooks. As Zimmerman notes, “All nations—not just the United States—construct narratives that are partly ‘untrue’ or mythological. But these narratives provide a common discourse of understanding” for those who read and study them.⁴¹⁹)

“The idea that the United States was a pure, high-minded nation and model of virtue”—this is where the general view of America, the “common discourse of understanding,” promoted by public school history texts in this country begins.⁴²⁰ From that point, what Jonathan Zimmerman calls “America’s majestic national narrative” unfolds inexorably—a “triumphal narrative” of the steady evolution toward perfection of America, land of “liberty, prosperity, and equality” and “beacon of hope and liberty to the world.”⁴²¹

What is perhaps most amazing about the otherwise dramatic changes in textbooks during the 1970s and after, including the systematic in-

415 Ravitch, op.cit., p. 44.

416 FitzGerald, op.cit., p.96.

417 Ibid., p.47.

418 James J. Martin, “History as Bunk,” *The Libertarian Review* March 1980, p. 41.

419 Zimmerman, op.cit., p. 8.

420 FitzGerald, op.cit., p. 131.

421 Zimmerman, op.cit., pp. 6, 10.

clusion of more information about the roles of women and minorities in American history, is the fact that this subtext, this “triumphal” tale of America’s inexorable march to greatness, has been left substantially unchanged. As Jonathan Zimmerman argued in 2002, while “[r]eformers did win important victories, forcing text publishers to add minority achievements and to delete egregiously racist passages,” at the same time “the traditional themes of American high school history—freedom, progress, and prosperity—remained mostly undisturbed.” While “hundreds of textbooks that had ignored or denigrated minorities now included accurate and sympathetic material about them,” this “was not allowed to alter the old story about peace, justice, and freedom.” In sum,

Our “history wars” have usually surrounded the issue of “inclusion”—who gets into the national narrative, and who does not—rather than the structure of the narrative itself: each “race” gets to have its heroes sung, as the *New York Times* put it in 1927, but no group may question the melody of peace, freedom, and economic opportunity that unites them all.⁴²²

II

The Breakdown of the Consensus— the Case of Howard Zinn

Writing only two years later, in 2004, the University of Georgia historian Peter Charles Hoffer, focusing on college-level American history textbooks, saw a somewhat different situation. In college classrooms around the country, according to Hoffer, the big change came in the 1980s, and it was a genuine change, as consensus history—the triumphant story of peace, justice, freedom, and the American Way—gave way to what he calls “the new history.”

The “new history,” as we have seen, was the name adopted for their revisionist movement, the first in American historiography, by James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard of Columbia University in the 1890s. What set that earlier New History apart from its consensus competitors was the enthusiasm with which the New Historians drew on so-

⁴²² Ibid., pp. 109, 118, 214.

cial sciences like economics and sociology to revise the historical record as needed. The new “new history” that arose in the 1960s and began affecting public school textbooks late in that decade was similarly enthralled by the contributions the social sciences could make to historical understanding. More importantly, the new “new history” had two distinct “wings” or “branches.” As Hoffer puts it, there were the “historians who focused on major public events, political and military figures”—the New Left Historians already familiar to readers of Chapter 3, many of them products of the Beard-saturated history department of the University of Wisconsin—and there were the historians “who thought that the everyday life of ordinary people—birth, marriage, child rearing, and other demographic issues—was more important.”

The latter group, the social historians, enjoyed their first successes working as consultants to ethnic and racial pressure groups like the NAACP, agitating for the removal of racist passages and the inclusion of accurate historical accounts of the African-American experience in this country in public school textbooks—or writing the new textbooks that would be needed to address the concerns of the pressure groups in question. It wasn’t long before the New Left Historians focused on political, military, and diplomatic history found that their fellow “new historians” had begun “radically shifting the angle of repose of all history in the direction of social and cultural life. The two sides in this debate—the major-events group and the everyday-life group—began to struggle for control of the programs at the major conventions, each accusing the other of intellectual imperialism.”⁴²³

Divided though they were, however, the purveyors of the new “new history” were able to conquer their opponents, the consensus historians, with little difficulty. Hoffer reports that “by the middle of the 1980s,” a number of “major textbook publishers scrambled to assemble groups of authors who would focus on the new-history perspective—stressing social as well as political history and inclusiveness and diversity.” And “[b]y the end of the 1980s, the purveyors of the new history were buoyed by their apparent triumph in the classroom and the textbooks.” It was, as Hoffer describes it, a “sweeping victory, in which consensus history was left to the popular historians (and a few notable academics of the old school).”⁴²⁴

On the other hand, the triumphant new historians were visibly squabbling among themselves even as they emerged victorious in the

423 Hoffer, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

424 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

classrooms and in the college textbooks—which showed that historians *could* violently disagree with each other about what should be included in the national narrative, something consensus historians had never done. By conducting this squabbling in public as they did, and by explaining in detail the errors and misdemeanors of the consensus historians who had preceded them, the new New Historians “required all of us to think about the way history was constructed. [The new “new history”] fostered critical, and self-critical, thought. But in so doing, it undermined the intellectual authority that consensus historians had claimed and, until the rise of the new history, had routinely exercised.”⁴²⁵

If the consensus historians had really been as full of it as the newly dominant New Historians claimed, and if the New Historians themselves could not reach agreement about the Truth in at least certain cases, then why, more and more students and teachers of history began asking, should we pay any more attention to the pronouncements of the New Historians than we apparently erroneously paid to the pronouncements of their predecessors? Why not study history on our own and reach our own conclusions?

And so they did. And so it is that today, for the first time in American history, we see textbook wars in which the competing textbooks do *not* all tell the same story—textbook wars in which, for the first time, there is true diversity of opinion about our nation’s past. It is instructive to examine a sample of today’s college-level American history textbooks and reflect on the situation this latest development in left liberal revisionism has brought about.

The Twentieth Anniversary Edition of *A People’s History of the United States: 1492–Present* by Howard Zinn, published in 1999 by Harper-Collins, enjoys a special status among current college-level American history texts. It was the first text to blend successfully the two strains of the new “new history”—“the major-events group and the everyday-life group”—and it was the first such text to enjoy widespread adoption and use on American college and university campuses. According to Michael Kazin, *A People’s History* “has gone through five editions and multiple printings, been assigned in thousands of college courses, sold more than a million copies, and made the author something of a celebrity.”⁴²⁶ According to Zinn, whose Ph.D. in history was awarded by the ubiquitous Columbia University, he wrote his *People’s History* because “the

425 Ibid., p. 232.

426 Michael Kazin, “Howard Zinn’s History Lessons,” *Dissent* Spring 2004. Online at <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/menutest/articles/wio4/kazin.htm>

circumstances of my own life [...] demanded of me that I try to fashion a new kind of history [...] a history different from what I had learned in college and in graduate school and from what I saw in the history texts given to students all over the country.”

By the “circumstances of [his] own life,” Zinn referred to his “up-bringing in a family of working-class immigrants in New York,” his “three years as a shipyard worker,” his service in the U.S. Air Force “as a bombardier in the European theater [...] in the second World War,” and his twenty years of experience “teaching history and what is grandiosely called ‘political science’” in American colleges and universities. These experiences had made it clear to Zinn that “[t]here were themes of profound importance to me which I found missing in the orthodox histories that dominated American culture.” One case in point was

the issue of class. It is pretended that, as in the Preamble to the Constitution, it is “we the people” who wrote that document, rather than fifty-five privileged white males whose class interest required a strong central government. The use of government for class purposes, to serve the needs of the wealthy and powerful, has continued throughout American history, down to the present day. It is disguised by language that suggests all of us—rich and poor and middle class—have a common interest.⁴²⁷

Another case in point was the issue of U.S. foreign policy. “My own war experience,” Zinn wrote,

and the history of all those military interventions in which the United States was engaged, made me skeptical when I heard people in high political office invoke “the national interest” or “national security” to justify their policies. It was with such justifications that Truman initiated a “police action” in Korea that killed several million people, that Johnson and Nixon carried out a war in Indochina in which perhaps 3 million people died [...].

Zinn wonders

how the foreign policies of the United States would look if we wiped out the national boundaries of the world, at least in our minds, and thought of all children everywhere as our own. Then we could never drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, or napalm on Vietnam, or wage war anywhere, because wars, especially in our time, are always wars against children, indeed our children.

⁴²⁷ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492–Present*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 658.

Nor was this all that Zinn found wanting in consensus history. There was also the issue of “how badly twisted was the teaching and writing of history by its submersion of nonwhite people”—and, for that matter, of women and gays.⁴²⁸ In writing his *People's History*, Zinn was not planning to retell the venerable old tale of America's inexorable evolution toward greatness as an international beacon of peace, prosperity, and freedom. Zinn had something very different in mind. “I wanted,” he says, “to awaken a greater consciousness of class conflict, racial injustice, sexual inequality, and national arrogance.” His vision of the American past was one of “continuing horrors: violence, war, prejudices against those who are different, [...] political power in the hands of liars and murderers [...]”⁴²⁹ Not a pretty picture.

It is instructive to examine Zinn's treatment, in his *People's History of the United States*, of the three topics in U.S. political, military, and diplomatic history which we have already traced through the pages of Gore Vidal's American Chronicle novels and through the works of the revisionist historians—namely, the nature and significance of the U.S. Civil War, the role of the United States in the two world wars of the first half of the 20th Century, and the origins and significance of the Cold War.

Like Vidal and the revisionists, Zinn regards the U.S. Civil War as having been touched off by something other than slavery.

Behind the secession of the South from the Union, after Lincoln was elected President in the fall of 1860 as candidate of the new Republican party, was a long series of policy clashes between South and North. The clash was not over slavery as a moral institution—most northerners did not care enough about slavery to make sacrifices for it, certainly not the sacrifice of war.

Among the “policy clashes” Zinn names are “free land” (Southerners believed public lands being opened to settlement should be sold, not given away), “a high protective tariff for manufacturers,” and “a bank of the United States” (both rejected by Southerners as not in their economic interest). He quotes Lincoln's statement to Horace Greeley that “[m]y paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it [...]” And he comments: “The American government had set out to fight the slave states in 1861, not to end slavery, but to retain the enormous national territory and market and resources.”⁴³⁰

⁴²⁸ Ibid., pp. 659–661.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., p. 660.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., pp. 188–189, 191, 198.

Like Vidal and the revisionists, Zinn regards Lincoln as having been something of a tyrant. The Civil War, he writes “was a war proclaimed as a war for liberty, but working people would be attacked by soldiers if they dared to strike, Indians would be massacred in Colorado by the U.S. army, and those daring to criticize Lincoln’s policies would be put in jail without trial—perhaps thirty thousand political prisoners.” Like Vidal and the revisionists, Zinn regards Lincoln’s reputation as the “Great Emancipator” as something of a joke. He approvingly quotes the *London Spectator*: “The principle [behind the Emancipation Proclamation] is not that a human being cannot justly own another, but that he cannot own him unless he is loyal to the United States.”⁴³¹

Like Vidal and the revisionists, Zinn sees Woodrow Wilson as having led the United States into another useless, destructive war (World War I), while using his power as chief executive, in defiance of the First Amendment, to silence all dissent and all criticism of his policies. “Congress passed and Wilson signed, in June of 1917, the Espionage Act,” Zinn writes, a law that “was used to imprison Americans who spoke or wrote against the war.” When Charles Schenck was convicted under the law and sentenced to six months in jail for the “crime” of having “denounced the draft law and the war,” he appealed his conviction—one of “the shortest sentences given in such cases,” Zinn reminds us—all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. There Schenck fell victim to the dubious “justice” of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who ruled, rather irrelevantly, that “[t]he most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic.” Schenck went to jail.⁴³²

As for World War II, Zinn observes that “if the entrance of the United States into” that conflict “was (as so many Americans believed at the time, observing the Nazi invasions) to defend the principle of nonintervention in the affairs of other countries, the nation’s record cast doubt on its ability to uphold that principle.” After all, Zinn reminds us, the United States

had opposed the Haitian revolution for independence from France at the start of the nineteenth century. It had instigated a war with Mexico and taken half of that country. It had pretended to help Cuba win freedom from Spain, and then planted itself in Cuba with a military base, investments, and rights of intervention. It had seized Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, and fought a brutal war to subjugate the Filipinos.

⁴³¹ Ibid., pp. 233, 192.

⁴³² Ibid., pp. 365-366.

The United States had, moreover,

engineered a revolution against Colombia and created the “independent” state of Panama in order to build and control the Canal. [...] Between 1900 and 1933, the United States intervened in Cuba four times, in Nicaragua twice, in Panama six times, in Guatemala once, in Honduras seven times. By 1924 the finances of half of the twenty Latin American states were being directed to some extent by the United States.

And these interventions sometimes lasted for years, even decades. The United States, Zinn notes,

sent five thousand Marines to Nicaragua in 1926 to counter a revolution, and kept a force there for seven years. It intervened in the Dominican Republic for the fourth time in 1916 and kept troops there for eight years. It intervened for the second time in Haiti in 1915 and kept troops there for nineteen years.⁴³³

In short, whatever its pretensions, the United States was an imperial power, and its “main interest” in entering World War II “was not stopping Fascism but advancing the imperial interests of the United States [...] Roosevelt was as much concerned to end the oppression of Jews as Lincoln was to end slavery during the Civil War; their priority in policy [...] was not minority rights, but national power.” In fact, as Zinn sees it, there was precious little evidence of any concern at all for minority rights on the part of the Roosevelt administration. He particularly takes the president to task for

calmly sign[ing] Executive Order 9066, in February 1942, giving the army the power, without warrants or indictments or hearings, to arrest every Japanese-American on the West Coast—110,000 men, women, and children—to take them from their homes, transport them to camps far into the interior, and keep them there under prison conditions. Three-fourths of these were [...] American citizens.

They “remained in those camps,” Zinn laments, “for over three years.”⁴³⁴

Like Vidal and the revisionists, Zinn looks upon Harry Truman’s decision to drop the new atomic bomb on a pair of Japanese cities in 1945 as both unnecessary and inexcusable. He refers to the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6 and the bombing of Nagasaki three days later as “atrocities.” He quotes the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, which “reported just after the war” that “Japan would have surrendered

433 Ibid., pp. 409, 408.

434 Ibid., pp. 410, 416.

even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped,” and sneers at President Truman’s argument that the only alternative to the bombing—an invasion of Japan—could cost half a million American lives. “These estimates of invasion losses,” Zinn writes, “were not realistic and seem to have been pulled out of the air to justify bombings, which, as their effects became known, horrified more and more people.”⁴³⁵

In defense of the United States Bombing Survey’s conclusion that Japanese surrender was already imminent when President Truman ordered the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Zinn points out that

[t]he Japanese code had been broken, and Japan’s messages were being intercepted. It was known the Japanese had instructed their ambassador in Moscow to work on peace negotiations with the Allies. Japanese leaders had begun talking of surrender a year before this, and the Emperor himself had begun to suggest, in June 1945, that alternatives to fighting to the end be considered. On July 13, Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo wired his ambassador in Moscow: “Unconditional surrender is the only obstacle to peace. . . .”

The Truman administration ignored all this, Zinn argues. Instead of working toward peace through diplomatic channels, the administration insisted on unconditional surrender, used the Japanese rejection of those terms as an excuse to murder more than 150,000 Japanese outright (to say nothing of the “tens of thousands more slowly dying from radiation poisoning”), then turned around and accepted Japanese surrender with one condition—“that the Emperor, a holy figure to the Japanese, remain in place [..].”

Since this was the only condition the Japanese had requested in the first place, Zinn contends, it is absurd to believe the Truman administration’s contention that the bombings were necessary to avoid an invasion the administration already knew full well was utterly unnecessary. Why, then, did Truman order the bombing? Zinn believes, with the Nobel Prize-winning British physicist Sir Patrick M. S. Blackett (1887-1974)—and with Vidal and the revisionists—that Truman “was anxious to drop the bomb before the Russians entered the War against Japan,” thus insuring that “the Japanese would surrender to the United States, not the Russians, and the United States would be the occupier of postwar Japan. In other words, Blackett says, the dropping of the bomb was ‘the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with Russia. . . .’”⁴³⁶

435 Ibid., p. 422.

436 Ibid., pp. 422-423.

This Cold War is another war Zinn is inclined to think needn't have been fought, and here again he is in agreement with Vidal and the revisionists. "United States foreign policy was not simply based on the existence of the Soviet Union" during the Cold War years, he writes, "but was motivated by fear of revolution in various parts of the world." He approvingly quotes Noam Chomsky's declaration that "the appeal to security" as a rationale for the Cold War "was largely fraudulent, the Cold War framework having been employed as a device to justify the suppression of independent nationalism—whether in Europe, Japan, or the Third World." And he opines further that what the U.S. government feared about this "independent nationalism" was its potential to

jeopardize powerful American economic interests. Revolutions in Nicaragua or Cuba or El Salvador or Chile were threats to United Fruit, Anaconda Copper, International Telephone and Telegraph, and others. Thus, foreign interventions presented to the public as "in the national interest" were really undertaken for special interests, for which the American people were asked to sacrifice their sons and their tax dollars.⁴³⁷

III

American History According to Eric Foner

Altogether, then, it seems fair to say that Zinn's very successful *People's History of the United States* conveys much the same vision of American diplomatic history that one finds in Gore Vidal's American Chronicle novels and the works of the revisionist historians. Nor is Zinn's text the only current text that does this to one extent or another. Consider, as a case in point, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* by Eric Foner, published by W. W. Norton and Company in 2005.

Foner (born 1943) was a classic red diaper baby. "Shortly before I was born," he writes, in an autobiographical essay included in his book *Who Owns History?*,

my father, Jack D. Foner, and uncle, Philip S. Foner, both historians at City College in New York, were among some sixty faculty members dismissed from teaching positions at the City University after

⁴³⁷ Ibid., p. 593.

informers named them as members of the Communist party at hearings of the state legislature's notorious Rapp-Coudert Committee, a precursor of McCarthyism.

The Rapp-Coudert Committee had been established a year earlier to investigate "subversive activities" in New York public schools, colleges, and universities. On the same day his father and his uncle lost their jobs, another uncle, Moe Foner, who worked in the CCNY registrar's office, lost his. Still another uncle, Henry Foner, a New York City high school teacher, was questioned by the committee but allowed to keep his job. "A few years later," Eric Foner tells us in *Who Owns History?*, "my mother was forced to resign from her job as a high school art teacher. During my childhood and for many years afterward, my parents were black-listed and unable to teach."⁴³⁸

Eric Foner earned both his B.A. and his Ph.D. in history during the 1960s at that hotbed of revisionism, where Charles Beard had taught and Harry Elmer Barnes had studied, Columbia University. His first book, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, was published in 1970. He went on to publish many more books and articles and to hold down the presidencies of both the Organization of American Historians (1993-1994) and the American Historical Association (2000). Peter Novick sees Foner as one of the "New Left historians," but as part of "the second wave" of that movement. The sensibility of the first wave "had been shaped in the fifties," while the second, in which Foner was "prominent," was characterized by "a countercultural sensibility." Moreover, the members of this second wave "were more likely than those in the previous group to have an activist orientation."⁴³⁹

As we have seen, the New Left Historians of the first wave looked on the U.S. Civil War as a sectional conflict with principally economic origins and not as a holy war against the moral evil of slavery. They tended to view Abraham Lincoln as a power-lusting tyrant, bent more on creating an invincible, centralized American State than on freeing slaves. Foner begs to differ. "The attack on Fort Sumter," he writes, "crystallised in Northern minds the direct conflict between freedom and slavery that abolitionists had insisted upon for decades. The war, as Frederick Douglass recognized as early as 1862, merged 'the cause of the slaves and the cause of the country.'" Nor was Lincoln's conduct of the war

⁴³⁸ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), p. 4.

⁴³⁹ Novick, op.cit., pp. 418-420.

overly high-handed. Foner acknowledges that an “intense new nationalism made criticism of the war effort—or of the policies of the Lincoln administration—seem to Republicans equivalent to treason.” He acknowledges that during the war years “[a]rbitrary arrests numbered in the thousands. They included opposition newspaper editors, Democratic politicians, individuals who discouraged enlistment in the army, and ordinary civilians like the Chicago man briefly imprisoned for calling the president a ‘damned fool.’” He acknowledges that Lincoln “twice suspended the writ [of *habeas corpus*] throughout the entire Union for those accused of ‘disloyal activities.’” He acknowledges that Lincoln had Clement Vallandigham, a Democratic Ohio Congressman “known for his blistering antiwar speeches,” brought up on charges of treason before a *military* court, and, following his “conviction,” had him deported to the Confederacy. Yet Foner concludes that “Lincoln was not a despot. Most of those arrested were quickly released, the Democratic press continued to flourish, and contested elections were held throughout the war.”⁴⁴⁰

Somehow all the very same sorts of repressive and unconstitutional behavior became much more objectionable half a century later, however, when they were being committed by Democratic politicians in the Wilson administration. “More than any other individual,” Foner reminds us, “Woodrow Wilson articulated [...] the conviction that [...] greater worldwide freedom would follow inevitably from increased American investment and trade abroad. Frequently during the twentieth century, this conviction would serve as a mask for American power and self-interest.” And the masquerade began early on in the century. “American involvement in World War I,” Foner writes,

provided the first great test of Wilson’s belief that American power could “make the world safe for democracy.” Most Progressives embraced the country’s participation in the war, believing that the United States could help to spread Progressive values throughout the world. But rather than bringing Progressivism to other peoples, the war destroyed it at home. The government quickly came to view critics of American involvement not simply as citizens with a different set of opinions, but as enemies of the very ideas of democracy and freedom. As a result, the war produced one of the most sweeping repressions of the right to dissent in all of American history.⁴⁴¹

A few pages on, and the superlatives are applied without further recourse to such sickly, wishy-washy phrases as “one of the most.” A few

440 Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, op.cit., pp. 524, 527, 528.

441 *Ibid.*, p. 721.

pages on, and it's a flat out certainty that "the war inaugurated the most intense repression of civil liberties the nation has ever known." Look at the case of Eugene Debs: sentenced to ten years in prison in 1918 at the age of 63 for the "crime" of speaking out publicly against the war. Even "[a]fter the war's end, Wilson rejected the advice of his attorney general that he commute Debs's sentence. [...] It was left to Wilson's successor, [Republican] Warren G. Harding, to release Debs from prison in 1921."⁴⁴²

The moral of the story seems clear. It is an intolerable affront to constitutional principles if a spokesman for a self-evidently righteous cause like keeping America out of a World War is silenced by government; it is no big deal if a spokesman for a self-evidently evil cause like protecting slave owners from getting their just desserts is silenced by government. Eugene V. Debs is a martyr to the cause of American freedom; Clement Vallandigham—well, it's too bad that he wasn't among those who were "quickly released"—most of those who were arrested were quickly released, you know, and just because one slips through the net here and there doesn't make Lincoln a despot. Freedom of speech, maybe the whole First Amendment, is for the politically correct, not the politically incorrect.

Still, Foner's treatment of World War I, for all its apparent hypocrisy, is quite comparable to the treatments of the same subject written by members of the first wave of New Left historians. "[T]hose who believed that the United States must prepare for possible entry into the war," he writes,

included longtime advocates of a stronger military establishment, like Theodore Roosevelt, and businessmen with close economic ties to Britain, the country's leading trading partner and the recipient of over 2 billion dollars in wartime loans from American banks. Wilson himself had strong pro-British sympathies and viewed Germany as "the natural foe of liberty."⁴⁴³

And, once America was in the war for these less-than-idealistic reasons—a chance to build up national military power, a chance to guarantee the financial gambles various big financiers and big corporations had made in enabling England's war effort—it quickly became apparent that the conflict, bloody and long as it was, would not advance any worthwhile ideals anywhere else in the world, but would only undermine American freedom here at home. Foner's treatment of American involvement in World War I is yet another instance of the historical

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 739, 741.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 729.

vision of Gore Vidal's American Chronicle novels and the American revisionist historians making its way into major, mainstream textbooks.

Foner's treatment of American involvement in World War II, like his treatment of the U.S. Civil War, is another kettle of fish altogether. Where Vidal and the revisionists argue that Franklin Roosevelt deliberately maneuvered the Japanese into attacking Pearl Harbor so he'd have a publicly acceptable reason for entering the war—something he'd been scheming for years to find a way to do—Foner assures his readers that “Pearl Harbor was a complete and devastating surprise” and that though “conspiracy theories abound suggesting that FDR knew of the attack and did nothing to prevent it so as to bring the United States into the war,” the fact is that “[n]o credible evidence supports this charge.”⁴⁴⁴

Vidal and the revisionists are relentless in their condemnation of President Harry S. Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. They portray this decision as having been not only utterly unnecessary to end the war but also motivated in truth by a desire to impress Joseph Stalin with the reality of American power. Foner tries to straddle the fence, briefly describing the arguments for and against Truman's decision, without taking any position on the issue himself—and without even mentioning the all-important Stalin connection.

IV

**Thomas E. Woods, Jr. vs.
Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen**

All things considered, however, Thomas E. Woods, Jr. does at least as good a job as Eric Foner of incorporating the left liberal vision of American history propounded by Vidal and the revisionists into a contemporary textbook—in this case, his wildly popular and wildly controversial *Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*. Technically, of course, the *Politically Incorrect Guide* is not a textbook at all. As Woods puts it, “when Regnery Publishing approached me with the idea for this book, they gave me a strict word limit of 80,000. Any serious historian

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 856.

knows how quickly 80,000 words go by. That's why I point out in my preface that the book is not intended to be a systematic textbook on American history. Good heavens, how could it be?"⁴⁴⁵

Nevertheless, Woods's book has been discussed just as though it were a textbook. During the spring of 2005, when it was fresh off the press and discussion of it was white hot, two separate articles published by the online History News Network made a point of comparing and contrasting the *Politically Incorrect Guide* with current textbooks in American history. One article, published in May, opened with the observation that "[d]isputes over history textbooks in the United States have not sent protesters into the streets (not recently, anyway), as they have this spring in China. But as readers snap up copies of *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* by Thomas Woods, Jr., the old story of a fight between 'traditionalists' and 'revisionists' has returned."⁴⁴⁶ An earlier article discussed Woods's book along with Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States* and Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen's *Patriot's History of the United States*,⁴⁴⁷ just as though the three works were all of the same general type—i.e., textbooks.

And to judge from the *Politically Incorrect Guide*'s popularity among students, it might as well be a textbook—it seems likely to have the sort of influence over them that only textbooks ordinarily can claim. It was published in December 2004. A month later, *The New York Times* reported that it was "being snapped up on college campuses and [...] recently soared to No. 8 on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction best-seller list."⁴⁴⁸ Come February, and sales were still brisk, especially to students. The History News Network noted that Woods's book was still "selling like hotcakes on college campuses."⁴⁴⁹

The view of the U.S. Civil War that students will find inside Woods's *Politically Incorrect Guide* is strongly reminiscent of both Gore Vidal and

445 Thomas E. Woods, Jr., "Response to My Critics." 12 April 2005. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/woods/woods39.html>

446 Joseph Moreau, "The American Textbook Wars: The Revised Version." History News Network, 23 May 2005. Online at <http://hnn.us/articles/11778.html>

447 Ronald Radosh, "Why Conservatives Are So Upset with Thomas Woods's Politically Incorrect History Book." History News Network, 7 March 2005. Online at <http://hnn.us/articles/10493.html>

448 Adam Cohen, "Editorial Observer: The Difference Between Politically Incorrect and Historically Wrong." *New York Times* 26 January 2005: A16. Online at <http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/9852.html>

449 Eric Muller, "What You Should Know About the Author of the NYT Bestseller, *Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*." History News Network, 7 February 2005. Online at <http://hnn.us/articles/10007.html>

all three groups of revisionist historians. “No one who has studied the issue,” Woods writes, “would dispute that for at least the first eighteen months of the war, the abolition of slavery was *not* the issue.” “Lincoln fought to ‘save the Union,’” he argues, “and consolidate its power.” “The question that no textbook bothers to raise,” Woods complains, “is whether the Southern states possessed the legal right to secede. They did.” Oddly, though, unlike Vidal and the revisionists, he passes over Lincoln’s sorry record as a civil libertarian in silence.⁴⁵⁰

He is similarly silent about Woodrow Wilson’s sorry record as a civil libertarian during World War I. But, again in common with Vidal and the revisionists, he is convinced that the United States had no business involving itself in that conflict. “No American interest was at stake,” he writes, “and American security was not threatened in the slightest.” Wilson dragged the nation into war, Woods contends, in order to win himself a role in the peace process that would ensue when the war ended. “Progressive” busybody that he was, Wilson was convinced that he knew better than anyone else how the postwar world should be planned and administered. But to put that superior understanding into practice required that he get a seat at the peace table. “And in order to get a seat at the peace table, Wilson believed that he had to be the head of a nation that had taken part in the war.” In effect, 320,000 young Americans died to give Woodrow Wilson a chance to prove his greatness as a planner of other people’s destinies.⁴⁵¹

Woods’s opinion of American involvement in World War II is little better. Like Vidal and the revisionists, he portrays Franklin Roosevelt as so “desperate to involve the United States in the war” that he “used deceptive means” to achieve that end. He quotes Secretary of War Henry Stimson on the president’s desire “to maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot.” He quotes Herbert Hoover’s accusation that FDR and his appointees were “doing everything they can to get us into war through the Japanese back door.” He passes over the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in silence and makes no reference at all to the U.S. role in the Cold War, beyond his observation that that conflict “resulted in trillions of dollars in military spending, large and small wars across the globe, the deformation of the Constitution, and the threat of nuclear annihilation.”⁴⁵²

450 Thomas E. Woods, Jr., *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), pp. 65, 67, 62.

451 *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 124.

452 *Ibid.*, pp. 177, 184.

When former New Left historian Ronald Radosh compared Woods's *Politically Incorrect Guide* with Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen's *Patriot's History of the United States* on the History News Network in March 2005, it was for the purpose of lamentation. Woods, Radosh felt, was unfairly and unjustly hogging public attention that properly belonged to Schweikart and Allen. Adam Cohen had recently denounced Woods's book in *The New York Times*, calling it "an attempt to push the [historical] record far to the right." Radosh lamented:

Tellingly, Cohen does not alert *Times* readers to the quite different serious reinterpretation recently published, Larry Schweikart and Michael Patrick Allen's *A Patriot's History of the United States*. Any reader of Schweikart and Allen's book will see immediately that it is a serious and substantive volume, based on a full recognition of the important secondary sources written by our major historians. While one may differ with some of their judgments and conclusions, no one would accuse them of conscious ideological distortions of the facts. Rather than let its readers know that conservatives are equipped to write honest historical interpretations, the *Times* omits any reference to this new book and lets Woods's nuttiness stand as the representative book of conservative thought.⁴⁵³

In fact, of course, in light of our discussion of Left and Right in the preceding chapter, it is obvious that Woods's book is not "conservative" in any meaningful sense at all. Woods the man, a Harvard graduate with a Ph.D. in history from Columbia (!), is another story. In his early 30s at the time his *Politically Incorrect Guide* was published, he had been teaching history at a Long Island community college. He told an interviewer in July 2005 that "I think of myself as antistatist in politics and conservative in most other areas, though I can't find a term to describe my outlook that's totally satisfactory."⁴⁵⁴ Woods's personal friend and fellow scholar Paul Gottfried, who also thinks of himself as a "conservative," has written of Woods as a man "who wears his Catholic traditionalism on his sleeve."⁴⁵⁵ One of Woods's books is entitled *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*. Another is entitled *The Church Confronts Modernity*. Still another is entitled *The Church and the Market*. So there may well be some legitimate grounds for calling Woods the man a "conservative." In his book, however, on the test is-

⁴⁵³ Radosh, "Why Conservatives Are So Upset." op.cit.

⁴⁵⁴ Bernard Chapin, "History and Truth: An Interview with Thomas E. Woods, Jr." 23 July 2005. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig5/chapin4.html>

⁴⁵⁵ Paul Gottfried, "Tom and His Predictable Detractor." 20 April 2005. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/gottfried/gottfried76.html>

sues of the U.S. Civil War, U.S. involvement in the World Wars, and the origins of the Cold War, Woods's positions are solidly liberal.

Schweikart and Allen, by contrast, offer a vision of American history that is profoundly conservative. To be exact, it is neoconservative. The neoconservatives are really the old false liberals of the 1930s, the New Deal "liberals," dressed up in new clothing. This time, at least, their clothing is appropriately chosen. Their political values have not changed, but they are now calling themselves by their rightful name. They are indeed conservatives, and the Republican Party is precisely the right political party for persons of their stripe.

By Schweikart and Allen's account, the U.S. Civil War was inevitable because "[n]o amount of prosperity, and no level of communication could address, ameliorate, or cover up the problem of slavery." And make no mistake about it, they assert: slavery, and not states' rights, was the issue. "[W]henever the historical record says 'states' rights' in the context of sectional debates," they write, "the phrase 'rights to own slaves' should more correctly be inserted." "It is not an exaggeration," they write, "to say that the Civil War was about slavery and, in the long run, *only* about slavery."⁴⁵⁶

As for Vidal's and the revisionists' contention that Lincoln was a tyrant who disregarded the Constitution and created a federal government much stronger and more centralized than anything the Founders had ever had in mind, Schweikart and Allen patiently explain that "a small federal government content to leave the states to their own devices" was "neither desirable nor possible to sustain." And further, "[t]hat the Republicans, in their zeal to free slaves, enacted numerous ill-advised taxes, railroad, and banking laws, is regrettable but, nevertheless, of minor consequence in the big picture."⁴⁵⁷

Where World War I is concerned, Schweikart and Allen maintain that Woodrow Wilson was too slow to involve the United States. If only the United States had entered the war on the Allied side in 1915, they complain, "it might have shortened the war and short-circuited Russian communism. Certainly Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov Lenin, exiled in Switzerland when the war started, would have remained an insignificant figure in human history, not the mass murderer who directed the Red October Revolution in Russia." But, alas, "Wilson opted for the

456 Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror* (New York: Sentinel, 2004), pp. 294, 257, 302.

457 *Ibid.*, pp. 294, 351-352.

safe, and cheap, response.” And once U.S. troops were involved in the war, the Wilson administration’s crackdown on dissent, like Lincoln’s wholesale jailing of newspaper editors who disagreed with him, was entirely acceptable. For “even if somewhat censored, the press continued to report [...] and people still experienced a level of freedom unseen in most of the world during *peacetime*.”⁴⁵⁸

FDR too was absurdly unwilling to go to war, according to Schweikart and Allen, of whom it might well be said that they never met a war they didn’t like. “[A]lthough he clearly (and more than most American political leaders) appreciated the threat posed by Hitler,” they write,

he [...] never made a clear case for war with Germany or Italy, having been lulled into a false sense of security by the Royal Navy’s control of the Atlantic. When he finally did risk his popularity by taking the case to the public in early 1940, Congress gave him everything he asked for and more, giving lie to the position that Congress wouldn’t have supported him even if he had provided leadership.

In short, though the president “recognized both the moral evil of Hitler and the near-term threat to American security posed by Nazi Germany...he nevertheless refused to sacrifice his personal popularity to lead the United States into the war sooner, knowing full well it would come eventually—and at a higher cost.”⁴⁵⁹

As to the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941, according to Schweikart and Allen, “FDR had [...] no advance warning about Pearl Harbor.” The revisionists’ claims to the contrary they dismiss as the deranged “back-door-to-war theories of the Roosevelt haters.” “Pearl Harbor,” they insist, “was a tragedy, but not a conspiracy.”⁴⁶⁰

And the atomic bombing of Japan four years later that marked the end of U.S. involvement in the conflict? “Recent research in classified Japanese governmental documents,” Schweikart and Allen tell their readers, “confirms the wisdom of Truman’s decision” to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In retrospect, three central reasons justified the dropping of the atomic bombs. First, and most important, the invasion of Japan would cost more American lives—up to a million, perhaps far more. The interests of the United States demanded that the government do everything in its power to see that not one more American soldier or sailor died than was absolutely necessary, and the atomic bombs en-

458 Ibid., pp. 512, 515.

459 Ibid., pp. 586–587, 596.

460 Ibid., pp. 588, 593, 595.

sured that result. Second, Japan would not surrender, nor did its leaders give any indication whatsoever that they would surrender short of annihilation. [...] Third, the depredations of the Japanese equaled those of the Nazis. The Allies, therefore, were justified in nothing less than unconditional surrender and a complete dismantling of the samurai Bushido as a requirement for peace.⁴⁶¹

In short, everything the U.S. government has ever told you is the unvarnished truth. American history really *is* a triumphal tale of the inexorable march to greatness of the United States of America, a pure, high-minded nation and a model of virtue, a land of liberty, prosperity, and equality, and a beacon of hope and freedom to the world. There is no need—no need at all—for revisionism in American history.

The problem here is not, mind you, that Schweikart and Allen get their *facts* wrong. They don't. Their facts are all in order, and they're all correct. It's their *selection* of the facts that is troublesome. To put the matter in a slightly different way, it's not so much what they chose to include that is troublesome; it's what they chose to leave out. Given the facts Schweikart and Allen choose to present to their readers (not a few of whom will assume, erroneously, that these are all the facts that matter), their conclusions—that it was necessary to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that the attack on Pearl Harbor came as a complete surprise to FDR, that Lincoln and Wilson were justified in suspending the U.S. Constitution—follow, if not inexorably, then at least quite satisfactorily. But the facts Schweikart and Allen chose to leave out, the facts they regarded as insufficiently important to include in their account of America's history, facts like the all-but-prostrate condition of Japan during the last year of the war, facts like the *indirect* efforts the Japanese government made through diplomatic channels months before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to sue for peace, facts like the support the Founding Fathers lent to the doctrine of secession and the all-but-universal esteem in which that doctrine was held, the extent to which it was viewed as "sacrosanct" by "almost all political theorists [...] before the [Civil] war"⁴⁶²—the inclusion of these facts would cast things in a somewhat different light.

Why were these facts left out? Because Schweikart and Allen's "sense of life," their understanding of "the way things happen" in the world, their estimate of "the way the world is," told them these facts

461 Ibid., pp. 628, 630.

462 Anthony Gregory, "Situational Totalitarianism." 16 August 2005. Online at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/gregory/gregory87.html>

were, if not unimportant, then at least *less* important than those they chose to include. And what sort of sense of life, what sort of understanding of the way things happen, what sort of estimate of the way the world is, are we talking about here? Essentially, as has been noted, Schweikart and Allen's worldview is a profoundly conservative one: The welfare, and especially the freedom, of any particular individual is of no importance. What matters is the welfare of the State, of society at large, of America. What is good for General Motors (and big business generally) is good for the country. There is no need to dwell on the abrogated rights of those young Americans forced at gunpoint to kill or be killed as soldiers in Lincoln's, Wilson's, and Roosevelt's wars. There is no need to fret over newspaper editors locked in prison cells for criticizing federal policy. Nor is there any need to concern oneself with the individuals resident in other countries whose lives and property have been destroyed by American troops and American bombs.

Liberals, men of the Left, men like Gore Vidal, Charles Beard, Harry Elmer Barnes, James J. Martin, and William Appleman Williams, have been driven to select different facts when assembling their own accounts of American history. The facts they chose seemed important to them, worth including, because of their liberal values, their belief in the supreme importance of the individual.

V

History, Fiction, and Objectivity— Some Concluding Observations

Nor is it incongruous to include Vidal in such company. Not only does his vision of American history square with the vision sketched out in the works of Beard, Barnes, Martin, and Williams, but he is as much and as legitimately an historian as any of them. The majority of his historical works are novels, which is to say, works of fiction—yes. But as we have seen, there is much about conventional history that is fictional or quasi-fictional in character, since to tell stories about the past—to do, that is, what history does, first and foremost—is to falsify or fictionalize that past.

The fact is, too, that there are historical novels and historical novels. One sort of historical novel—the more common sort—is a tale of the invented events that make up the lives of invented characters set against an historical backdrop: the American Revolution in Kenneth Roberts's *Rabble in Arms*, the French Revolution in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, the U.S. Civil War in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, World War I in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, the Russian Revolution in Ayn Rand's *We, the Living*. The historical backdrop in such novels can be well or badly rendered, of course. It can be rendered accurately or inaccurately. It can be detailed and precise or general and vague. But a backdrop is a backdrop. The focus of such novels is less on history than on an invented story.

There is another sort of historical novel, however, a sort perhaps best typified in the present period by certain works of Gore Vidal and William Safire, in which there are few if any fictional characters and few if any fictional events. Virtually all the dialogue in novels like Vidal's *Burr* and *Lincoln* and Safire's *Freedom* is carefully drawn from the letters and journals of the historical figures who speak it (and from the reports of writers who knew them at first hand). In the "Afterword" to *Lincoln*, Vidal wrote that "[a]ll of the principal characters" in the novel "really existed, and they said and did pretty much what I have them saying and doing [...] I have reconstructed them from letters, journals, newspapers, diaries, etc."—which is, of course, precisely what an historian does.

In writing his American Chronicle novels, Vidal tells us in a 1988 essay, he attempted to "make the agreed-upon facts as accurate as possible. I always use the phrase 'agreed upon' because [...] the so-called facts are often contradicted by other facts. So one must select; and it is in selection that literature begins. After all, with *whose* facts do you agree?"⁴⁶³ And, as we have seen, this is a problem confronting the conventional historian as well. S/he too must select. S/he too must decide whose facts comport best with what we know about how things happen and about the way the world is.

Novels like Vidal's *Burr* and *Lincoln* and Safire's *Freedom* are exhaustively researched and painstakingly accurate *depictions* of *actual* events. Such books deserve to be regarded as works of history. Like Beard and Barnes and Martin and Williams, Vidal made choices, deciding what to leave in and what to leave out, choosing what he regarded as the *important* facts and passing over the less important or unimportant ones. Because he is a liberal, a man of the Left, a man who values individual

463 Gore Vidal, "How I Do What I Do If Not Why" in *At Home*, op.cit., p. 275.

liberty and free institutions, his choices are not unlike those that lie behind the works of Beard and Barnes and Martin and Williams—liberals and men of the Left, every one.

Conservatives have different values and choose different facts when they set about the task of writing history. But thanks to the true liberals of our past and present, a fairly vigorous marketplace of ideas exists in this country, and thanks to the decadence of our culture—which is to say, thanks to the steady decline of authority in our culture—since the late 1960s, that marketplace of ideas is now fairly roiling with dozens of competing American histories reflecting dozens of political views and senses of life. As readers, we get to pick and choose among them, and judge for ourselves.

This is the very best situation we could possibly expect, and we should be happy about it. Peter Novick was right: there is no objectivity in history—not if by “objectivity” we mean “neutrality,” not if by “objective history” we mean a history untainted by “ideological assumptions and purposes” and the “distortions” such assumptions and purposes supposedly introduce into the historical record.⁴⁶⁴

If, on the other hand, we mean by “objectivity” something more like fairness or evenhandedness, then indeed it could be said that objectivity is possible in historical writing, however seldom it may in fact be achieved. Thomas L. Haskell, who teaches historical method and U.S. cultural and intellectual history at Rice University, considers it preposterous “to think of truth seeking as a matter of emptying oneself of passion and preconception, so as to become a perfectly passive and receptive mirror of external reality.” In point of fact, no coherent history could be produced in any such way. As John Tosh notes, any attempt to simply read through the available primary sources without presuppositions or assumptions of any kind leads only to the production of “an incoherent jumble of data.” Haskell invites us to contemplate an historian of a totally different kind.

Consider an extreme case: a person who, although capable of detachment, suspends his or her own perceptions of the world not in the expectation of gaining a broader perspective, but only in order to learn how opponents think so as to demolish their arguments more effectively—who is, in short, a polemicist, deeply and fixedly committed as a lifelong project to a particular political or cultural or moral program. Anyone choosing such a life obviously risks being thought boorish or provincial, but insofar as such a person successfully enters

464 Novick, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

into the thinking of his or her rivals and produces arguments potentially compelling, not only to those who already share the same views, but to outsiders as well, I see no reason to withhold the laurel of objectivity. There is nothing objective about hurling imprecations at apostates or catechizing the faithful. But as long as the polemicist truly engages the thinking of the enemy, he or she is being as objective as anyone.

As Haskell sees it, “the most commonly observed fulfillment of the ideal of objectivity in the historical profession is simply the *powerful argument*—the text that reveals by its every twist and turn its respectful appreciation of the alternatives it rejects.” The author of such a text, Haskell maintains, has “to suspend momentarily his or her own perceptions so as to anticipate and take account of objections and alternative constructions—not those of some straw man, but those that truly issue from the rival’s position, understood as sensitively and stated as eloquently as the rival could desire.”⁴⁶⁵

This is a tall order, of course, and one not frequently filled. But it is difficult indeed to imagine why a work of history that did achieve such fairness, such evenhandedness, should not be described as “objective.” It is this standard, the one so clearly and persuasively delineated by Thomas Haskell, that should guide the efforts of historians to be “objective”—rather than the “essentially confused” ideal of “objectivity” that Peter Novick argued against two decades ago, the one he found to be based on “philosophical assumptions” that were (and are) “dubious,” the one he judged to be “psychologically and sociologically naïve.”⁴⁶⁶ Properly done, history is plenty difficult enough already. To saddle historians with a standard of objectivity that cannot be met—to make their work, not merely hard, but actually impossible—profits no one and, by turning historians into producers of incoherent jumbles of data, impoverishes us all.

465 Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 150, 54, 151, 152.

466 Novick, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

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