

History and National Stupidity

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History is not self-executing. You do not put a coin in the slot and have history come out. For the past is a chaos of events and personalities into which we cannot penetrate. It is beyond retrieval and it is beyond reconstruction. All historians know this in their souls. "There is no such thing as human history," one historian has told the New-York Historical Society.

Nothing can be more profoundly, sadly true. The annals of mankind have never been written, never can be written; nor would it be within human capacity to read them if they were written. We have a leaf or two from the great book of human fate as it flutters in the stormwinds ever sweeping across the earth. We decipher them as we best can with purblind eyes, and endeavor to learn their mystery as we float along to the abyss; but it is all confused babble, hieroglyphics of which the key is lost.

The scholar who uttered these stark postmodernist sentiments was John Lothrop Motley, the great nineteenth-century historian of the Netherlands, speaking to the New-York Historical Society in December 1868.

All historians are prisoners of their own experience and servitors to their own prepossessions. We are all entrapped in the egocentric predicament. We bring to history the preconceptions of our personality and the preoccupations of our age. We cannot seize on ultimate and absolute truths. "Purely objective truth," said William James, "is nowhere to be found.... The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything."

So the historian is committed to a doomed enterprise—the quest for an unattainable objectivity. Yet it is an enterprise we happily pursue, because of the thrill of the hunt, because exploring the past is such fun, because of the intellectual challenges involved, because a nation needs to know its own history (or so we historians like to think).

As I have suggested elsewhere, history is to the nation as memory is to the individual. As a person deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future.

But conceptions of the past are far from stable. They are perennially revised by the urgencies of the present. When new urgencies arise in our own times and lives, the historian's spotlight shifts, probing now into the shadows, throwing into sharp relief things that were always there but that earlier historians had carelessly excised from the collective memory. New voices ring out of the historical darkness and demand attention.

One has only to note how in the last half-century the women's rights movement and the civil rights movement have reformulated and renewed American history. Thus the present incessantly recreates, reinvents, the past. In this sense, all history, as Benedetto Croce said, is contemporary history. It is these permutations of consciousness that make history so endlessly fascinating an intellectual adventure. "The one duty we owe to history," said Oscar Wilde, "is to rewrite it."

J.R. Seeley was a nineteenth-century Victorian and his definition of history as "past politics" ruled the curriculum for a while. Then came social history and the consequent discomfiture of political and intellectual history. Social history diverted the spotlight to minorities, hitherto neglected in standard historical works. When I went to college in the 1930s, the study of slavery was still influenced by the writings of Ulrich B. Phillips, who took an indulgent view of it. Discussion of the causes of the Civil War was dominated by the denial of James G. Randall and Avery Craven, and for that matter Charles A. Beard, that the war was inevitable and slavery its cause. Instead, these historians contended, a "blundering generation," driven by fanaticism,

especially by the fanaticism of the abolitionists, had transformed a “repressive conflict” into a “needless war.” As for Reconstruction, the view of W.A. Dunning and Claude Bowers was that the white South had to be rescued from the barbarous freed slaves and their villainous Yankee carpetbagger allies.

Ulrich Phillips on slavery and James Randall and Avery Craven on the causes of the Civil War have long since been discarded in the teaching of American history. As for Dunning and Bowers on Reconstruction, I recall an incident that shows how new pressures overrule old perspectives. In June 1963, when Governor George Wallace tried to block the admission of two black students to the University of Alabama, President Kennedy sent in the National Guard to secure their admission. That night he went on television to explain his action. Racial equality, Kennedy said, was “a moral issue...as old as the Scriptures and...as clear as the American Constitution.” That same night in Mississippi Medgar Evers, the director of the state NAACP, was murdered.

The next week the President invited Medgar Evers’s widow and their children to the White House and he asked me to sit in on their meeting. They were an exceptionally attractive family. When they left, I said to President Kennedy, “What a terrible business.” Kennedy said sadly, “Yes. I don’t understand the South. I’m coming to believe that [the vehemently anti-Southern abolitionist] Thaddeus Stevens was right. I had always been taught to regard him as a man of vicious bias. But when I see this sort of thing, I begin to wonder how else you can treat them [i.e., the Southern racists].” The change from the Dunning and Bowers school that had taught Kennedy to the work of Eric Foner was nothing less than a revolution in historians’ handling of Reconstruction.

Sean Wilentz and his *Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* has a penetrating account of the causes of the Civil War. He has also most generous remarks about my book *The Age of Jackson*. The special contribution of *The Age of Jackson* was, I suppose, to shift the argument from section to class. *The Age of Jackson* was written more than sixty years ago in another America, and reflected FDR’s struggles to democratize American capitalism. I was an ardent young New Dealer, and I sought precedents in American history for the problems that faced FDR.

In advancing my interpretation, I was conditioned by the passions of my era. Conservatives in the angry Thirties used to fulminate against the New Deal as “un-American.” I wanted to show that far from importing foreign ideas, FDR was acting in a robust American spirit and tradition. Jackson’s war against Nicholas Biddle and the Second Bank of the United States thus provided a thoroughly American precedent for the battles that FDR waged against the “economic royalists” of his (and my) day.

FDR saw it this way too. Years later, I came upon a letter he had written to Colonel Edward M. House, Woodrow Wilson’s *homme de confiance*, in November 1933. “The real truth of the matter,” Roosevelt told House,

is, as you and I know, that a financial element in the larger centers has owned the Government ever since the days of Andrew Jackson—and I am not wholly excepting the Administration of W.W. The country is going through a repetition of Jackson’s fight with the Bank of the United States—only on a far bigger and broader basis.

Jackson and Roosevelt, it appeared, had much the same coalition of supporters—farmers, workingmen, intellectuals, the poor—and much the same coalition of adversaries—bankers, merchants, manufacturers, and the rich. There was consequently a striking parallel between the 1830s and the 1930s in politics, and there was striking parallelism in the basic issue of power—the struggle for control of the state between organized money and the rest of society. I was hopelessly absorbed in the dilemmas of democratic capitalism made vivid for my generation by FDR and the New Deal, and I underplayed and ignored other aspects of the Age of Jackson. The predicament of slaves, of the red man and the “trail of tears”—the forcible removal of the Cherokees and other Indians from Georgia to the far frontier—and the restricted opportunities for women of the period (save for Peggy Eaton, the wife of John Eaton, Jackson’s secretary of war, a woman who in 1920s style rebelled against convention with Jackson’s support) were shamefully out of my mind.

Sean Wilentz has done what I should have done in his brilliant, powerful work *The Rise of American Democracy*. He has given slavery and the Indians their proper place in the Age of Jackson, and he describes Jackson’s failures to deal with both. The perspective of 2000 is bound to be different from the perspective of 1940. And the perspective of 2060 is bound to be different from the perspective of 2000—and I trust Sean will still be around.

There remains Motley's despair over the knowability of the past. This despair has been recently reinforced by what has become known as the linguistic turn. Motley's doubts reappear, this time decked out with postmodernist jargon of deconstruction, discourse analysis, intertextuality, and narratology. All history is seen in this light as the continuation of ideology by other means, as the projection and manipulation of relationships of domination and oppression. Some philosophers of history would even abolish, or at least attenuate, the distinction between the stories historians tell and other forms of storytelling.

Of course most working historians repudiate the idea that there is no real difference between history and fiction. For historians, observes the British Marxist scholar Eric Hobsbawm, a dear friend of mine for nearly seventy years, "even for the most militantly antipositivist ones among us, the ability to distinguish between the two is absolutely fundamental. We cannot invent our facts. Either Elvis Presley is dead or he isn't." In view of the doubts about Elvis's death frequently expressed in supermarket tabloids, we can perhaps amend Hobsbawm's statement by substituting the name of someone safely dead, like Napoleon. For there is an external reality that exists independently of our representations. We can appreciate Motley's despair over penetrating that reality and getting history right. The hieroglyphics have no key. But history is not an illusion or a fiction or a myth. "True as the present is," said William James, "the past *was* also."

I am impressed these days by the apparent popularity of the History Channel on television. I hope that this expresses a growing historical consciousness among our people. For we are the world's dominant power, and I believe that history is a moral necessity for a nation possessed of overweening power. History verifies John F. Kennedy's proposition in the first year of his presidency, when he said:

We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent or omniscient—that we are only 6 percent of the world's population—that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 percent of mankind—that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity—and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.

History is the best antidote to illusions of omnipotence and omniscience. It should forever remind us of the limitations of our passing perspectives. It should strengthen us to resist the pressure to convert momentary interests into moral absolutes. It should lead us to a profound and chastening sense of our frailty as human beings—to a recognition of the fact, so often and so sadly demonstrated, that the future will outwit all our certitudes and that the possibilities of history are far richer and more various than the human intellect is likely to conceive.

A nation informed by a vivid understanding of the ironies of history is, I believe, best equipped to live with the temptations and tragedy of power. Since we are condemned as a nation to be a superpower, let a growing sense of history temper and civilize our use of that power.

Sometimes, when I am particularly depressed, I ascribe our behavior to stupidity—the stupidity of our leadership, the stupidity of our culture. Thirty years ago we suffered military defeat—fighting an unwinnable war against a country about which we knew nothing and in which we had no vital interests at stake. Vietnam was bad enough, but to repeat the same experiment thirty years later in Iraq is a strong argument for a case of national stupidity.

In the meantime, let a thousand historical flowers bloom. History is never a closed book or a final verdict. It is always in the making. Let historians not forsake the quest for knowledge, however tricky and full of problems that quest may be, in the interests of an ideology, a nation, a race, a sex, or a cause. The great strength of the practice of history in a free society is its capacity for self-correction.

This is the endless fascination of historical writing: the search to reconstruct what went before, a quest illuminated by those ever-changing prisms that continually place old questions in a new light. As the great Dutch historian Pieter Geyl was fond of saying, "History is indeed an argument without end." That, I believe, is why we love it so much.

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