

APPENDIX ONE

The Historian's Task

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This commentary, delivered in 1952 by Warren Susman to a seminar composed of history graduate students at the University of Wisconsin, sums up better than any other document the young scholar's *methodological* objections to the prevailing Cold War temperament. Most of all, he reassesses the Progressive historians' tradition and its utility for today.

I have edited for brevity and clarity. Special thanks go to William Preston, who preserved this document and made it available, and to Bea Susman, who graciously permitted its publication.

American Historians and the Contemporary Crisis

A specter is haunting American intellectuals—the specter of communism. All the powers of the intellectual order have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this specter: businessman and bureaucrat, [Allan] Nevins and [Reinhold] Niebuhr, unvisited liberals and revisited conservatives.

Where is the widely circulated periodical that has not welcomed the contributions of American historians in the battle of words with communism? Where is the governmental agency that has not sought to bolster its ranks with trained historians?

Two things result from this fact: (1) The historian is acknowledged by important forces in American society to be a vital assistant in our Cold War; (2) it is high time that historians should, in the face of developments within their own nation, examine critically the views, the aims, the tendencies developed or emphasized in the struggle with the specter of communism—high time that historians take stock of the main currents in American historiography that appear central in the period 1945 to 1952.

To this end, this paper is directed to historians and intellectuals of various historical schools or philosophical persuasions in an attempt to define and analyze what I have found to be the main currents and to sketch what I believe to be the consequences of such trends.



Ever since the introduction of history as a serious academic study in the seminars of Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins, American historians have attempted to stress the utility of their subject. Indeed, the notion of service to the community seems to have been an important correlative of "scientific history" as it was practiced by many leading historians in Germany as well as in the United States. From the seminars of Adams came many historians and social scientists determined to make their researches more "scientific" so that these researches might be more useful. Not content with passing their investigation on to their students or to their colleagues at annual meetings, many of these men attempted an application of their work to the problems facing local governments, the states, and the national government itself. The young men from Adams's seminar who came to the University of Wisconsin to teach exemplify this tradition at full flower by their contributions to the well-known "Wisconsin idea." Moreover, many of these men contributed widely to the periodical press of the nation. It is not beside the point to note that Frederick Jackson Turner was an experienced journalist or that Woodrow Wilson was to become active in American politics.

But if the tradition of service has been persistent in the historical profession, the idea of utility and the nature of the service to be offered have changed in the many decades of professional life since the 1880s. In the midst of the crises of the 1890s, historians like Turner attempted to define the problems that faced America and to investigate their historical origins. Seeking to understand our institution more clearly, they meticulously and carefully examined their origin and development. These historians sought to explain change and to understand the difference between men, institutions, and nations. With the work of Turner, scientific history in America reached its great climax. For Turner, the idea of utility meant even more than it did for some of his colleagues. For he sought, through a study of American history, to explain, to define the crisis in which the American people of the 1890s found themselves. What he contributed was a definition of what he believed to be the reality of the contemporary historical situation; this reality was an America without a physical frontier. Pointing out this reality of the 1890s, Turner then began his investigation of what this physical frontier had meant in American development when it did exist. His definition, then, was to be tested, to be analyzed, and to be used for the study of previous American history itself. But also, since it offered some insight into current affairs, it might be useful as the basis for formulating a program for future action. Turner himself only rarely hinted at what this program might be; that was the task of others in society.

In the period that followed, historians began to look more closely at the problems of the past precisely so that the present might better be able to solve its own

problems. The linking of the past and the present was the major aim of what [James Harvey] Robinson called the "New History." Adopting a critical approach the problems of the past, many of these historians were willing to join with others in the community who adopted a critical attitude toward current problems in order to formulate a realistic program of action. In this way, many of these historians became part of what is known as the Progressive movement.

Charles Beard did not write an *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* so that it might become the "bible" of the Progressives. He wrote his famous monograph—and here is a daring notion—to investigate certain problems related to the establishment of the federal Constitution. That the Progressives quickly adopted this work of cold and often dry scholarship as a document in their cause tells us more about the Progressive movement than it does about the work of Charles Beard. For Beard was not ready to point to any whole view of reality in his America, and only in *The Rise of American Civilization* did he ultimately and slowly come close to such a definition. What Beard provided for the Progressives was an approach to problems, a method and a critical attitude that could be used with equal vigor and success for the investigation of problems of the past and of the present. The idea of the utility of history took on new meaning; instead of using history and its methods to define any whole view of the current reality, history was used more directly to illuminate certain selected problems, and the historian felt justified in attempting to make the past bear directly on the solution of current problems.

Two world wars elaborated the view of the historian as publicist for a cause, and seriously affected the idea of utility. In the crisis of war, historians rushed to the defense of their country. Mobilized by brilliant government publicists, many of these men entered the service of their country directly. Defining the current reality in terms of the crisis of the war alone, they plunged into the job of defense, sacrificing historical truth when necessary because—given their narrow definition of current reality—without such sacrifices they believed there would be no Allied victory, and without such a victory, nothing left worth having. Their training in critical history was often forgotten.

In one sense at least, the "New History" came to an unanticipated climax with the historians' contribution to the war effort in World War I. In the crisis of peace, many serious historians, carefully analyzing the results of the war and the historians' "New History" venture in support of that war, looked for a redefinition of the role of history and offered a new definition of the reality of their contemporary America. In the period between the wars, a theory of the historical enterprise best known as Relativism, bolstered by the work of such historians as Beard and Becker, the logic of John Dewey, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, and the writings of Croce, the Italian Hegelian, became the most distinctive American philosophy of history.

Relativism, as I see it, advanced the following propositions: The historian and his work were influenced by a "frame of reference," a view of the world and its

problems; that historian was selective in his enterprise and therefore could never define the whole of reality, his results being partial and temporary; each event had many causes, and the historian could reach only a partial truth, for indeed there were many truths; because of all these factors, history was likely to be rewritten by each generation in view of its own problems and "frame of reference."

While this theory was being developed, the New Deal came to power in America and effected important changes in American society. The early New Deal brain trust contained no historians, but the leaders and policymakers of the administration often had an active interest in history, and there is some evidence to suggest that many measures adopted were influenced by this study of American history. But as World War II approached, many historians—who had previously supported many New Deal measures in the periodicals of the nation—became active in the administration itself. The war once again mobilized the historian. By 1945, the war against fascism ended, and in 1946, when the Social Science Research Council issued the report of the Curti Committee—a report committed to the theory and practice of Relativism—this theory found itself on the defensive.

For a new battle (which might now be called the Lukewarm War) had taken the place of the previous open conflict with fascism, and true to the tradition of service, many historians—several of whom had seen government service during World War II—now devoted their efforts to this new struggle. These historians, once again narrowing the definition of realism for our times to this single battle with communism, have seen fit to attack Historical Relativism. This view of history, [Samuel Eliot] Morison and others insist, has limited the historian's effectiveness in mobilizing the youth we teach and the profession we labor in for the titanic struggle that they define as the contemporary crisis. Conyers Read has pointed to the historian's responsibility in this "total war." From positions of high authority in the profession, from posts in some of America's greatest universities, from the pages of a periodical press ever willing to accept their articles, these historians—History's New Men of Power—have flung out the challenge. Since the Lukewarm War is the only reality for America today, history must devote itself in all ways to the problems of that struggle. "Frame of reference" history suggested that we might not be able to discover the Whole Truth and that what is considered Right is only a socially conditioned value judgment, devoid of objective reality. The age demands, however, that we must have the Whole Truth and even more—Truth and Right must be on our side. In adopting this wartime view of service, I believe the historian is doing a great disservice to his profession and his nation.

It is historical justice, perhaps, that this very attack on the Relativist position has resulted in striking evidence to support key propositions advanced by that very view. When Admiral Morison attacks "frame of reference" history and foolish considerations of historical method, he has not actually abandoned Relativism. He praises history devoted to meticulous examination of the facts and re-creation of what actually happened, but surely he does not suppose that the United States Navy is paying for such meticulous and critical scholarship because of a love of

facts for their own sake. His own ideas concerning the need of history to prepare youth to face what he believes to be the problems of the present have been shaped by his own selective notion of the present crisis. It is the very problems of the present that lead him to believe that the older relativism has had dangerous results on our thinking, which makes many of us unable to think as he does. Morison's call for a conservatively oriented history of the United States in the interest of "balance" assumes, once again, the writing of "frame of reference" history—substituting, perhaps, just a more appropriate "frame of reference." Thus the attack on Relativism has its "frame of reference," it is selective, it is utilitarian, and it undertakes to rewrite history in view of a particular definition of the contemporary crisis. It is but a new relativism that believes that its conclusions will not be partial and that it will be able to point out the whole truth, the only truth. Here is the basic surface distinction between these two relativisms. While the older relativists have often been forced to retreat to old absolutistic strongholds—expressing transcendent faith in Democracy, Civil Liberties, and Peace—newer relativists have come forth with startling clarity to endorse, by their very practice, much of what they attack in theory.



Three . . . historians have been especially singled out for attack: Turner, Beard, and Parrington. With some justification, the particular views advanced by each in his attempt to define reality in America have been critically examined and even discarded. But primarily these men have been singled out for attack by the new historiography because of the support they advanced for the ideal of the liberal national state. Turner, ever the enduring frontiersman, emphasized the unique national development of the American nation and was clearly proud of the achievements he felt were related to this distinctiveness. Beard, ever the enduring federalist, frankly espoused the "Little America" position and was deeply concerned about the adoption of policies in line with the most intelligently conceived national interest. Parrington, ever the enduring Jeffersonian, dreamed of the triumph of Jeffersonian ends through the intelligent use of the national state. All had essentially rejected the forces the new historiography has tended to emphasize.



In line with the older liberal creed, which they cannot quite forget, these historians have often insisted that they do not favor the restoration of business to political power [as in the Gilded Age]. But since survival is the key question of the day, we cannot be too squeamish about our documentation of the "free world's" position. Older liberal attitudes toward business must be changed because of our current needs in our current crisis. [Arthur] Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Vital Center*, has perhaps indicated an ideological reason for an alliance: "Liberals have values [that word again! WS] in common with most members of the business community—in particular a belief in a free society."

As a result, there has been an attempt to rehabilitate the businessman and to glorify the achievements made under American capitalism. Very few historians would refuse to acknowledge the tremendous achievements of modern capitalism. Statistics can be brought forward; the percapita number of bathtubs and radios can be demonstrated graphically. Who can deny the material effects of the capitalistic order for some statistical entity known as the American people?

But the rehabilitation of the businessman is directed toward still other conclusions. Allan Nevins, High Priest of Rehabilitation, has suggested that without the achievements of the great capitalists of the post-Civil War period, the United States would not have been able to wage successfully two world wars and now prepare us to wage successfully a third such conflict. If the conservatives are the heroes of our intellectual growth, the businessmen are the "heroes of our material growth." Nevins believes that we have been too apologetic about our material growth, too concerned about minor abuses in the system, too "feminine" in our idealism. Materialism is power, and power is obviously what we need if we are to win out in our battle with the specter of communism.

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But such a view of American capitalism leads to historical distortion of the most dangerous kind. It limits the critical investigation of the role the businessmen actually played in the history of their own period. It assumes that material achievement can be regarded as an end in itself. It fails to ask the key historical questions: How was such achievement made possible in America? What methods were used to reach such achievements? What were the effects of such methods on the American people and the world? What was the role of the businessman in creating two world wars and possibly a third? What were the effect of the triumph of American capitalism on the political life of the nation and the power structure of its society? What were the spiritual or ethical consequences of the success of American capitalism? Are we willing to stand uncritically on the successes of American capitalism as a platform for the current crisis? If success is somehow equivalent to ethical correctness, what claims could be made for the communist state, also successful by certain standards?

Even more serious than this ethical conclusion is the clamp being slowly placed on those who which to carry on more critical examinations of the role of American capitalism and business leadership in our society. Those who point to flaws in the system, who indicate problems that have not been solved, are called dangerous because they tend to weaken the bulwark against the specter of communism. Thus the current position may strangle historical scholarship. But even more serious is the possibility that if weaknesses cannot be indicated, that if unsolved problems cannot be suggested, we may be unable to correct such weaknesses, solve such problems. This narrow definition of current reality can eventually lead to weakening of the American capitalist system, praised now as so successful.

The alliance with conservatism and the business tradition negotiated by the

new historiography offers a serious challenge to the ideal of the liberal national state. A more direct attack on liberal nationalism itself has been possible with two of these concepts: the idea of an Atlantic civilization and the idea of a Western civilization. The notion of civilization has become most powerful in recent years; emotively, civilization has come to stand for all that is good, communism has been redefined as all that is evil. Civilization is, conveniently, a very vague term. It serves with excellent effect as a propanganda device in the current conflict, and the specter of civilization has been geared to fight the specter of communism. Historical investigation makes it difficult in the extreme to define with any precision the basic elements and values that constitute a civilization. Such a definition is obviously selective and must compress several centuries of human experience. But how convenient the idea of some vaguely defined Atlantic civilization is as historical or ideological identification that can justify certain diplomatic arrangements like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization! If we are to raise the specter of Western civilization, how do we decide to accept the teaching of the Nazarene who lived out his life in the Near East and to reject the teaching of the German Ph.D. who wrote his monumental work in the British Museum? But perhaps precise definition is really not important. Supported by a series of picture articles in *Life*, bolstered by the constant repetition of the phrase, the idea of Western civilization makes an excellent, if spectral, bulwark against communism.

These vague notions of civilization have not helped us to more clearly define our position in the world. They have not given us any sharp insights that will enable us to overcome the many problems we face in dealing with people and nations, East and West. What they have made possible is an attack on nationalism so traditionally related to ideas of liberalism. What they have made possible is the obscuring of America and her internal problems. They have given us a perspective so high above and so far away from our own shores that we can no longer see our important sectional and economic divisions and problems; we can no longer see our nation with people of different races and national origins, different religious views derived from different cultures. By assuming the sameness of men, by refusing to examine the basic differences between cultures, it has allowed us to fall under the spell of Toynbeean mysticism and therefore to believe we—as a part of some vaguely defined civilization—are citing correctly when we "respond" to the "challenge" of communism.

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In recent years there has been much discussion of a Christian interpretation of history. A recent president of the American Historical Association addressed the profession on this theme. But it remained for Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian of great brilliance and impressive forcefulness, to advance a Christian interpretation of history and support for the current narrow view of the crisis that well serves the conservative relativists. Ignoring as childish the optimism for the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, attacking the scientific rationalism of the nineteenth century, and

dismissing as "pretentious" the work of twentieth-century social studies, Niebuhr's interpretation of history attempts to return man to his proper place in the universe, a creation of history as well as a creator of it. We live in a ironic situation, he maintains, because we have discovered that our ideals and dreams are in conflict with our actual achievement and with the reality of the present. Once again defining reality in terms of the single great conflict with communism, Niebuhr calls the intellectual back to the fold of pessimistic, deterministic Christianity, which offers hope in a future world and no solution in this one, for man can solve no problem worth solving in his own human lifetime. Not only is Man born with the taint of original sin upon him, but nations also are conceived bearing the traces of this sin. While attacking nationalism and defending the conservative tradition, Niebuhr raises an impressive bulwark of Christian pessimism against the specter of communism and in place of traditional history. For history, as we know it, has utilized the optimism, the rationalism, and the pretentious social studies he has discovered to be useless in Man's attempt to answer the problems that face him.

I dwell upon these views because I believe they are definitively related to the conservative relativism I have been discussing and, indeed, are the intellectual meat on which much of this new historiography subsists. Morison quotes Niebuhr with agreement, and Peter Viereck, revisiting conservatism, has reminded us that conservatism is, after all, the "political secularization of the doctrine of original sin." Schlesinger, who so often describes man's fate in Niebuhrian terms, has written this striking passage:

For history is not a redeemer, promising to solve all human problems in time; nor is man capable of transcending the limitations of his being. Man generally is entangled in insoluble problems; history is a constant tragedy in which we are all involved, whose footnote is anxiety and frustration, not progress and fulfillment.

What Niebuhr and the rest are doing, it seems to me, is destroying the study of history itself. Discarding those forces that gave rise to a modern view of history itself, they attempt to replace history with a variety of Christianity. The Greeks and the Romans wrote brilliant history before the existence of Christianity. We have no great work of history conceived of in Christian interpretation. Although it is true that critical history developed, at least in part, through the work of critical church historians, history as we know it today is primarily the product of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, modified by the scientific rationalism of the nineteenth century.

What Niebuhr has forgotten is that Christianity itself is a "creature" as well as a "creator" of history, a force moving in history and subject to the same analysis and examination as any other great force. If Niebuhr is too humble in his view of man, he is often too vainglorious in his own view of Christianity. That view of Christianity itself has been shaped by his own narrow definition of the present crisis,

and to establish his view he felt called upon to use history itself as his documentation.

The new historiography, then, has failed to consider the consequences inherent in its alliance with conservatism, with business, and with the internationalism of a so-called Atlantic civilization. Accepting many of the views of man advanced by the Niebuhrian Christian interpretation of reality, they have often submitted to views that are in direct contradiction to the very nature of the study of history as we know it.

This new historiography developed because these historians continued to believe in the tradition of service so much a part of the historical profession. But one can doubt that the struggle with the specter of communism presents the only or even the key moral question for our time. We are forgetting to examine the consequences of the present struggle for our own internal development and problems. And all the time the power of the atom and the atomic bomb threatens to make us all the outcasts of Yucca Flats.

What is the answer for the historian who still believes in the tradition of service? Can he return to the older, the liberal relativism? I doubt it. Historians should be greatly indebted to the older relativism for what it taught us about the study of history, but that relativism was too optimistic at the start. Hypothesizing a completely open universe with unlimited possibilities and limitless combinations and permutations, that relativism was unable to give us any working definition of reality. Too often, it was forced to confine itself to isolated problems and unable to relate individual problems to a larger whole. Thus it was not able to assist in the creation of any positive program of action. It failed to consider the changes that were taking place in its own social basis of support, and many adherents of the position have often found themselves "mourners at their own funerals." Since it couldn't solve key problems, since it couldn't seem to provide a whole view of reality that would be widely accepted, it often grew too pessimistic. Its earlier optimism failed it, and under the assault of forces that professed not only to have an acceptable view of reality but a true morality and program to follow (even if that program meant a war), liberal relativism retreated to the sanctity of absolute ideals it could hold against all comers. In the end the older relativism left us, as historians, with little but faith—vitaly important, to be sure, but not enough for the meaningful practice of history.

But the newer relativism has begun with too pessimistic a view of the world's affairs and man's ability. It has had its definition of reality in America, but that definition, biased by fear and hate, has been too narrow. Believing that man cannot really solve the many problems that he faces, that the range of choices is extremely limited, the newer relativism has used history as a bulwark for certain vaguely defined values robbed of historical content or meaning, as a support for decisions that have already been made for us by history. Stressing tradition and permanence in times of greatest social change, its pessimism has led to the remarkably optimistic belief that the position is the only correct one. It has often failed to consider

the consequences of its own position and has retreated to an absolutistic scheme of morality, to a Christian pessimistic determinism that threatens the existence of the very discipline we usually call history.

What, then is the alternative for the historian concerned about service? . . . It is not facetiously that I suggest our motto be, "Historians of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your footnotes!" For unless we are able once again to concern ourselves with problems of research, with our methods ore clearly understood and our tools of the best-grade material—bright, shining, sharp—unless we are able to overcome the pitfalls and the pessimism of the current historiography, we shall find ourselves isolated and unread (not because we write poorly but simply because we have nothing of interest or import to say), mumbling to each other, building yet greater stacks of notes, and gaily playing with our footnotes, as the world—too busy for games—passes us by . . . It is the historians's obligation to improve his craft, to make meaning his scholar's degree; it is the historian's task to do what he can to make all things become more real, to aid man in passing from reality to even more meaningful reality.

APPENDIX TWO

The Boy Scouts in Cuba

LEE BAXANDALL, MARSHALL
BRICKMAN, AND DANNY KALB

The following excerpt captures, in miniature, the spirit of the skit at the 1960 Anti-Military Ball, referred to in the reminiscences of Saul Landau, Lee and Roz Baxandall, and others.

III. Cuba: Castro and Co. Twist the Lion's Tail

Enter BIG FIDEL, BIG RAUL, BIG CHE, *armed to the teeth, smoking large cigars*

FIDEL: I tell you, Big Che, I have had enough out of the United States! I have had patience with them. Endless *paciencia*. But a time comes when patience must end:

CHE (*consolingly*): I understand, Big Fidel, I understand. They have been pushing you very hard. But there is no need to worry, Big Fidel. Help is on the way. Soon we will have factories larger than General Motors! Highways longer than the Mississippi! Magazines fatter than *Life* magazine! Our time is coming.

FIDEL (*impatiently*): You speak of factories, Big Che, but all we get from our friends, the Socialist Nations, is an endless stream of bureaucrats! Ambassadors! Party Members! Heroes of Labor! Commissars! When are the