

VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2018

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

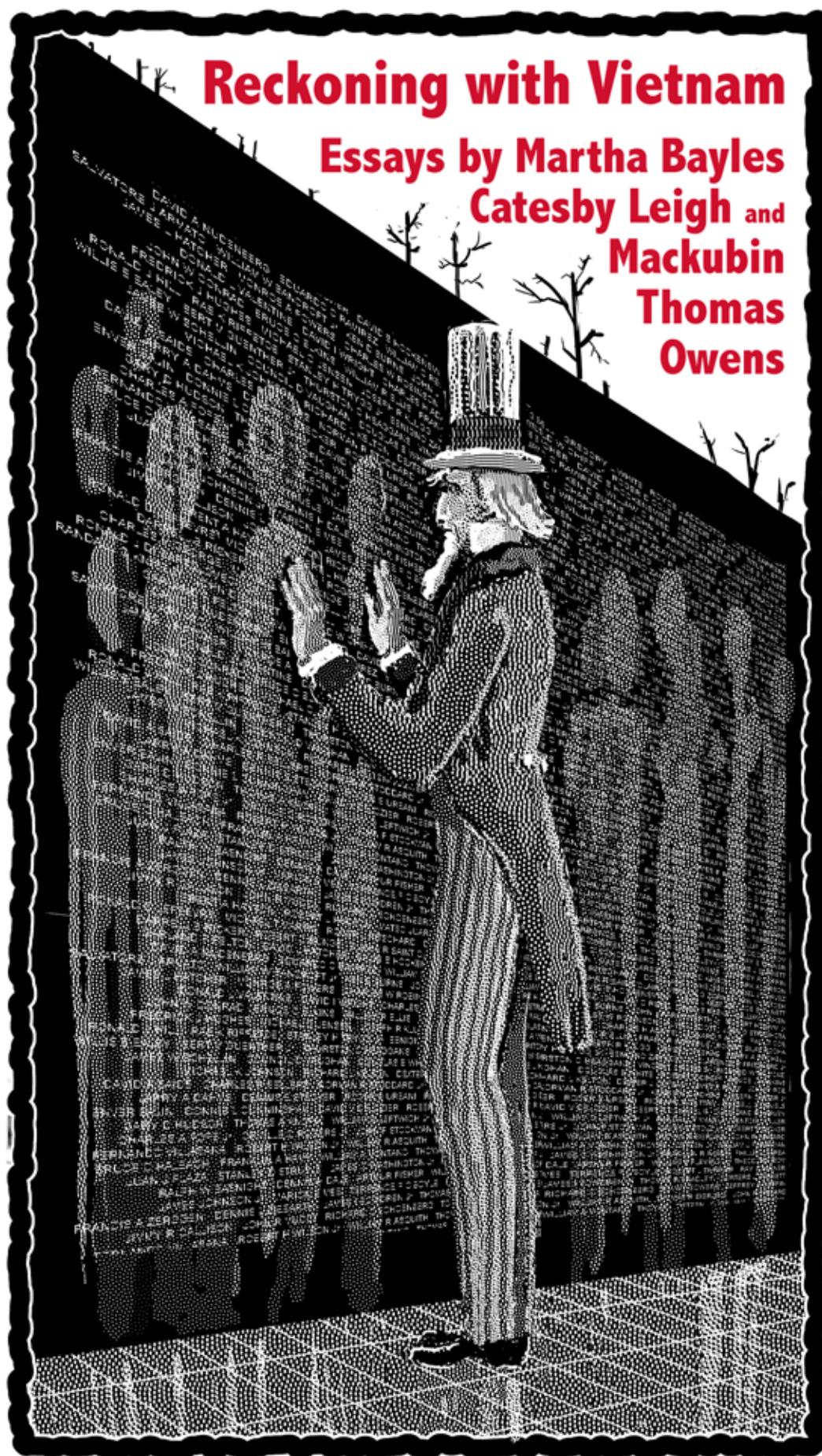
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PRICE: \$6.95

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Book Review by William Voegeli

HE'S HISTORY

Schlesinger: The Imperial Historian, by Richard Aldous.
W.W. Norton & Company, 496 pages, \$29.95



ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLISHER, *Schlesinger: The Imperial Historian* is “the first major biography of preeminent historian and intellectual Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.” Will there ever be a second? In another generation, when those who recollect Schlesinger as a writer who was unusually famous and well-connected have also passed from the scene, will anyone care to read about him?

Historian Richard Aldous does a surprisingly good job of making Schlesinger interesting, no small feat when writing a biographer's biography. He does not, however, succeed or even try very hard to show that Schlesinger's life and work were *important*. Aldous's book was published ten years after Schlesinger died at the age of 89. A decade is not so long a time, yet the author of *The Age of Jackson* (1945)

and *The Age of Roosevelt* (1957-60) seemed, even before the Age of Trump, a less-than-major figure from a distant, receding past.

Some of Aldous's choices are puzzling. For example, he never unpacks the subtitle's claim that Schlesinger was a, much less *the*, “imperial” historian. It amounts to nothing more than an opaque reference to one of Schlesinger's most prominent books, *The Imperial Presidency* (1973), published during Watergate.

The brief epilogue is also peculiar. In it, we are given to understand that Schlesinger's story proves—despite the warnings of many historians, including Schlesinger's father, a Harvard professor—that an “action-intellectual” can indeed both write and shape history. Undeniably, Schlesinger's accomplishments in each field were formidable. He won a Pulitzer prize

when he was 28 for *The Age of Jackson*, the first of many books over his long career to garner praise and awards, to climb the bestseller lists while being taken seriously by other scholars. Amidst all this he was politically engaged, not only advancing liberal arguments but causes and candidates. Schlesinger helped found Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) in the 1940s, wrote speeches for Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson in the 1950s, and was a White House advisor to President John Kennedy in the 1960s.

BUT IF THE POINT OF ALDOUS'S STORY about Schlesinger is proving the feasibility of being a participant-observer, this modest contention hardly justifies either man's efforts. For one thing, Schlesinger was

in the vicinity of political action more than he was an actor of any consequence. Attorney General Robert Kennedy's recollection of the historian's role in his brother's administration was cutting: "He didn't do a helluva lot, but he was good to have around."

And, as Aldous shows, Schlesinger's case is especially problematic because his prominence and political engagement often diminished his credibility, rendering even the most serious writing suspect. In 1957 a critic used the term "hagiography" to describe Schlesinger's first book on FDR. Similar assessments, such as "court historian," would dog Schlesinger for the rest of his life. Christopher Hitchens, for example, described Schlesinger's book on the Kennedy presidency, *A Thousand Days* (1965), as "the founding breviary of the cult of JFK."

Schlesinger wouldn't, or couldn't, disprove such characterizations. *A Thousand Days* offers breathless puerilities that a stern editor would have removed from a high school valedictory speech. Kennedy, we are told, "gave the world for an imperishable moment the vision of a leader who greatly understood the terror and the hope, the diversity and the possibility, of life on this planet and who made people look beyond nation and race to the future of humanity." Having made the Kennedy family's political success

his abiding concern after Dallas, Schlesinger would later contend that those who thought about Mary Jo Kopechne's drowning in just the right way would ultimately realize that it was one more reason to vote for Ted Kennedy in a presidential election:

Ever since Chappaquiddick, he has been spending his life trying to redeem himself for those hours of panic. He has become ever more serious, more senatorial, more devoted to the public good. I think this ceaseless effort at self-redemption may be for Teddy Kennedy what polio was for FDR.

One can be a scholar. One can, out of careerism or conviction, be a publicist. But ultimately one must choose between those professions. The large but finite reservoir of prestige Schlesinger filled as a historian was drained dangerously low by his determination to interpret every political event he commented on as a vindication of liberalism and its leaders. Nor could Schlesinger and his defenders really be surprised, given the frequency and zeal of his advocacy, that the people who came to read his historical writings as part of this lifelong political project strongly suspected that the entire oeuvre had the heft and reliability of a collection of press releases.

FOR ALL THAT, ALDOUS'S BIGGEST MISTAKE is devoting just 48 out of 389 pages of text to the final 42 years of his subject's life, from the publication of *A Thousand Days*, when its author was only 48, to his death in 2007. This choice prevents Aldous from engaging questions that might have rendered his book quite different, and far more significant: Why did Schlesinger say so little about liberalism's dramatic, protracted descent from the intellectual and political dominance it had achieved by 1965? And why did Schlesinger's thoughts on this question, when offered, do so little to halt liberalism's decline, or even make sense of it?

In 1998 journalist Nicholas Lemann wrote that it was "amazing, in retrospect, what a long string of presidents—from Truman all the way to Carter—felt a twinge of terror at the possibility of, to put it in shorthand, incurring the disapproval of Arthur Schlesinger." Writing this claim out in longhand means that for some 30 years Schlesinger was the most reliable barometer of, in Lemann's words, the "good opinion of the centrist-liberal establishment," shaping its thoughts and reflecting its sensibilities. But as the 20th century wore on, that establishment lost its sway and self-assurance, to the point where, as Lemann accurately states, President Ronald Reagan "couldn't have cared less" about Schlesinger's pronouncements.

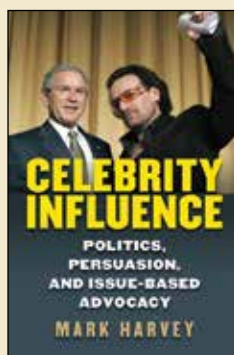
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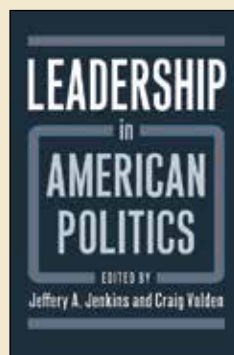
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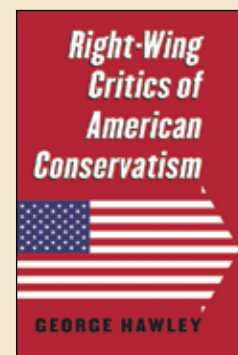


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Schlesinger made his reputation between 1945 and 1965, when liberalism was at high tide. He lived off that reputation after 1965, the point at which Aldous loses interest in his subject. But none of the hundreds of thousands of words Schlesinger wrote in his final four decades did anything to restore liberalism's mid-century hegemony. In that respect, liberalism's failure was Schlesinger's failure—not because he could have single-handedly effected a different outcome, but because even its most talented expositor could neither gauge nor repair what was missing and mistaken in the liberal worldview.

“I REMAIN TO THIS DAY A NEW DEALER, unreconstructed and unrepentant,” Schlesinger wrote in the memoir covering his first 33 years, *A Life in the Twentieth Century* (2000). He strove to vindicate the New Deal by establishing its antecedents in a useable past. *The Age of Jackson*, Aldous writes, “presented the New Deal as the culmination of the liberal tradition,” whose deepest commitment was to what Schlesinger called “executive vigor and government action,” which would help the people and constrain the powerful. On the book's last page, a Franklin Roosevelt quote supplies a benediction: the Jacksonian “heritage” is “the American doctrine that entrusts the general welfare to no one group or class, but dedicates itself to the end that American people shall not be thwarted in their high purpose to remain the custodians of their own destiny.”

Even as the Jacksonian heritage had animated the New Deal, liberalism's mission was to meet America's postwar challenges by honoring and elaborating the New Deal's heritage of activist government. Schlesinger made this clear in *The Vital Center* (1949), his most explicitly prescriptive book of political theory. The “Vital Center” was central in the sense that it maintained a space for vigorous but sensible reforms between the business community on the right and Marxism on the left. The book was, in that respect, closely related to the ADA's repudiation of Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign, which had in turn embodied the 1930s Popular Front conviction that because Communists were just “liberals in a hurry,” New Dealers should want nothing to do with an anti-Soviet Cold War abroad, working instead for ever more socialism at home.

Schlesinger's *Vital Center* was vital in that he called for liberals to summon a “fighting faith” in defense of their middle ground between the Chamber of Commerce and Joseph Stalin. This challenge was permanent, since the experience of life in liberal democracies inclined men “toward compromise, persuasion and consent in politics, [and] toward tolerance and diversity in

society.” To sustain free societies required going beyond such moderation, however. Liberalism's duty was to forge a “new radicalism” that aspired to “reunite individual and community in fruitful union,” thereby healing modern life's “savage wounds” with a “conviction of trust and solidarity with other human beings.”

It is, to put it gently, unclear what such bromides mean, or whether they mean anything at all. After the Great Society, liberalism would face the accusation that its practical implementation meant throwing money at problems. *The Vital Center* betrays a similar defect: when it comes time to explicate basic purposes and principles, liberalism's powerful inclination is to throw rhetoric at the problem. Schlesinger's forensic gifts aggravated rather than solved this shortcoming.

Even before the tumult of the 1960s, *The Vital Center's* glittering generalities proved increasingly inadequate to liberalism's needs. Schlesinger tried, with little success, to apply the New Deal's spirit of bold, persistent experimentation to the realities of the postwar economic boom. Instead of the 1930s' bread-

Is liberalism's raison d'être to fulfill America's promise or expiate America's sins?

and-butter issues, however, he called on the government to address “the general style and quality of our civilization,” without ever explaining what that would mean or how it was possible. Schlesinger opined at one point that Billy Graham's popularity showed that liberals needed to address Americans' dissatisfactions amidst their unprecedented affluence, an ominous and mystifying failure to differentiate the needs served by politics from those pursued through religion. His disdain for the style and quality of America's civilization during the 1950s sometimes equated liberalism with dynamism, valued for its own sake rather than for advancing any particular goal. John Kennedy's 34-month presidency, Schlesinger implausibly declared, “transformed the American spirit,” thereby “wiping away the world's impression of an old nation of old men, weary, played out, fearful of ideas, change, and the future.”

IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION it became painfully clear that the *Vital Center* could not hold. In the 1940s ADA liberals had forcefully rejected

the Stalinist Old Left. But in the 1960s they never solved the problem posed by the New Left, which jettisoned the Old Left's turgid ideological consistency in favor of denouncing America's racism and imperialism with strident, often incoherent, fury. Those few liberals who rejected the New Left categorically became ex-liberals: the neoconservatives, such as Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and ADA cofounder John P. Roche, who emerged as a force—more intellectual than political—in the late 1960s and 70s.

Liberals who disdained that path attempted, instead, to retain the ability to function while holding two opposed ideas in mind at the same time. One was that liberals should not execrate the New Left as they had the Old, because there really was a good deal of truth, painful but bracing, in the former's indictment of America as a nation with a shameful history, leaving it a society with fundamental, debilitating pathologies. The other idea was that although these problems appeared profound, they were really just like all other problems: amenable to solution, or at least mitigation, by rational, idealistic liberal reformers who would rely on expertise, executive vigor, and government action to make Americans the custodians of their own destiny.

No one achieved, and very few attempted, a synthesis of the views that America was improvable despite being irredeemable. Schlesinger, like most liberals, lurched between the two positions. A collection of his essays published in 1963 was titled *The Politics of Hope*. One 1960 article it contained looked to the coming decade being “spirited, articulate, inventive, incoherent, turbulent, with energy shooting off wildly in all directions. Above all, there will be a sense of motion, of leadership, and of hope.”

THE SUBSEQUENT COLLECTION OF HIS writings, titled *The Crisis of Confidence*, was published in 1969 at the end of a decade that had proven more volatile but also more harrowing than Schlesinger had predicted. In it, he asserted that Americans had become “the most frightening people on this planet,” because “the atrocities we commit, at home or abroad, seem even now hardly to have touched our official self-righteousness or dented our transcendent conviction of moral infallibility.” We must recognize, he admonished,

that the destructive impulse is in us and that it springs from some dark intolerable tension in our history and our institutions.

We began, after all, as a people who killed red men and enslaved black men. No doubt we often did this with a Bible and a prayerbook. But no nation, however righteous its professions, could act as we did without doing something fearful to itself—without burying deep in itself, in its customs, its institutions, its conditioned reflexes and its psyche, a propensity toward violence. However much we pretended that Indians and Negroes were subhumans, we really knew that they were God's children too. It is almost as if this initial experience fixed a primal curse on our nation—a curse which still shadows our life.

Schlesinger was hardly unique among that era's liberals in employing overwrought generalizations and hysterical verbiage. In 1967, for example, Senator Robert Kennedy berated a college audience for not condemning the war in Southeast Asia. "Don't you understand that what we are doing to the Vietnamese is not very different than what Hitler did to the Jews?"

HAVING ABANDONED HOPE AND lost confidence during the 1960s, Schlesinger and the centrist-liberal establishment thrashed about for the next four decades trying to regain them. Few of their efforts improved the Democratic Party's fortunes. Liberals in this era were endlessly non-judgmental about blacks who rioted in cities (because of their victimhood) and students who rioted on campus (because of their idealism). Institutions like Berkeley and Columbia, Schlesinger wrote in *The Crisis of Confidence*, would be "wiser and better universities as a result of the student revolts." That volume also went out of its way to disparage the biggest single component of the New Deal coalition. It was, Schlesinger said, "the less educated, low-income whites who tend to be the most emotional and primitive champions of conservatism." By contrast, "The affluent and better-educated...tend to care more about rationality, reform and progress." If the less educated rejected the acquiescence of the better educated in riots and crime, these objections only proved how bigoted and primitive the low-income whites really were. The possibility that their concerns had some merit or deserved respect was ruled out of order.

Such commentary, representative of Schlesinger's thinking and a good deal of liberal discourse in the late 1960s and early '70s, is an archival entrant in any "This is Why Trump Won" compilation. It's striking that the historian who launched his career with a study of Jacksonian democracy was so obtuse about

the Silent Majority's populism. That force grew stronger over the ensuing decades, elevating Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, the Tea Party, and Donald Trump. As Walter Russell Mead wrote at the beginning of the 2016 presidential campaign, the essence of Jacksonian populism is "honor-driven egalitarianism and fiery nationalism." Modern-day Jacksonians

loathe the interfering busybodies of the progressive state, believe that government (except for the police and the military) is a necessary evil, think most "experts" and university professors are no smarter or wiser than other people, and feel only contempt for the gender theorists and the social justice warriors of the contemporary classroom.

Indeed, Schlesinger's commitment to making ordinary Americans the custodians of their own destiny was always embedded in a liberalism that required the leadership of charismatic figures who would mediate, direct, and implement the people's will. All of Schlesinger's Democratic heroes, in particular, were exceedingly rich, socially prominent, or both: Franklin Roosevelt, Averell Harriman, Adlai Stevenson, and the Kennedys. By contrast, Harry Truman's domestic and foreign policies aligned with Schlesinger's preferences in every important respect...but he was also a man of humble origins, decidedly rough rather than polished, and the only American president of the 20th century without a college degree. During his presidency Schlesinger disparaged Truman as "a man of mediocre and limited capacity" who has "managed to surround himself with his intellectual equals."

INCREASINGLY, THE JACKSONIAN POPULISM described by Mead has worked against rather than through the Democratic Party, culminating in 2016's earthquake. The theoretical problems in Schlesinger's work correspond to political vulnerabilities in the world. "The political and cultural snobbery that informs *The Vital Center* has proved the undoing of American liberalism," Fred Siegel wrote in 2005. Hillary Clinton was the perfect foil for Donald Trump, a model of what Siegel described as those "professional liberals, in both senses of the term, who expect, given their putative expertise, to be obeyed."

Schlesinger's concessions to the New Left did him little good. Even as some Old Leftists never forgave his ADA anti-Communism, the New ones reviled him, Aldous writes, as "a mealy-mouthed Establishment stooge," disdaining Schlesinger as a member of a Kennedy Administration that had done more

to advance the Vietnam war than the civil rights movement. The consequences included protests and threats at his public events, and even being "harangued and denounced," in Schlesinger's words, while going about his daily life. The Stalinists of the 1930s, he wrote in his diary in 1970, were as "rigid, dishonest, and fanatical" as the New Leftists, but less malignant by virtue of harboring neither a "cult of violence, nor the associated contempt for the mind."

Ultimately, in a surprising coda to his career as a political disputant, Schlesinger wrote these misgivings for public consumption. *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* was published in 1991, the year he turned 74. Amidst the recently declared "culture wars," Schlesinger revisited questions raised by the kind of analysis he had offered in *Crisis of Confidence*. The new book recognized that jeremiads about founding atrocities imposing a primal curse had been extended and systematized in the dogma of multiculturalism, which held that European civilization is the source of all the planet's abominations: slavery, racism, imperialism, colonialism, and environmental degradation. "Is the Western tradition a bar to progress and a curse on humanity?" Schlesinger asked, summarizing the multiculturalist indictment. "Would it really do America and the world good to get rid of the European legacy?"

HIS ANSWER, WORTH QUOTING AT length, rejected multiculturalism calmly but decisively:

No doubt Europe has done terrible things, not least to itself. But what culture has not?... The sins of the West are no worse than the sins of Asia or of the Middle East or of Africa.

There remains, however, a crucial difference between the Western tradition and the others. Unlike other cultures, the West has conceived and acted upon ideals that expose and combat its own misdeeds. No other culture has built self-criticism into the very fabric of its being. The crimes of the West in time generated their own antidotes. They have provoked great movements to end slavery, to raise the status of women, to abolish torture, to combat racism, to promote religious tolerance, to defend freedom of inquiry and expression, to advance personal liberty and human rights.

Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source—the *unique* source—of those

liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, equality before the law, freedom of worship, human rights, and cultural freedom that constitute our most precious legacy and to which most of the world today aspires. These are *European* ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption....

There is surely no reason for Western civilization to have guilt trips laid on it by champions of cultures based on despotism, superstition, tribalism, and fanaticism....

It was the French, not the Algerians, who freed Algerian women from the veil...; as in India it was the British, not the Indians, who ended (or did their best to end) the horrible custom of *suttee*—widows burning themselves alive on their husbands' funeral pyres. And it was the West, not the non-Western cultures, that launched the crusade to abolish slavery—and in doing so encountered mighty resistance, especially in the Islamic world (where Moslems, with fine impartiality, enslaved whites as well as blacks). Those many brave and humane Africans who are struggling these days for decent societies are animated by Western, not by African, ideals. White guilt can be pushed too far.

It would discomfit Schlesinger to know that President Trump made a similar point last year in a speech in Warsaw:

We empower women as pillars of our society and of our success.... And we debate everything. We challenge everything. We seek to know everything so that we can better know ourselves.

And above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of ev-

ery soul to live in freedom. That is who we are. Those are the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization.

What we have...inherited from our ancestors has never existed to this extent before. And if we fail to preserve it, it will never, ever exist again. So we cannot fail.

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AFTER *THE Disuniting of America* was published, it is clear that Schlesinger lost this argument, at least among Democrats and liberals, where he had hoped to win it. His older writings about America's singularly monstrous crimes, not his later arguments against multiculturalism, represent the consensus that animates modern liberalism's growing obsession with identity politics, diversity, privilege, and intersectionality. If one accepts the premises that America's transgressions are so enormous and wicked they can never be fully gauged, and that atoning and compensating for them should consume the country for as many centuries as it has committed and benefitted from these sins, it follows that white guilt can *never* be pushed too far.

Heather MacDonald praised *The Disuniting of America* in *Commentary* for its "eloquence and erudition," while Henry Louis Gates, Jr., condemned arguments like Schlesinger's as a "dream of an America in cultural white face." Clearly, that moment presented Schlesinger the opportunity to change teams, to become a culture warrior fighting alongside William Bennett and Allan Bloom. He declined, choosing to singe rather than burn his bridges.

To reassure his lifetime allies, Schlesinger tacked on a few paragraphs in an epilogue to the book, in which he sketched out a new Vital Center, fully and equally opposed to the multiculturalists of the Left and the "monoculturalists" of the Right. To make clear

that he had nothing to do with the latter, Schlesinger described them as "hyperpatriots, fundamentalists, evangelicals, laissez-faire doctrinaires, homophobes, anti-abortionists, pro-assault-gun people, and other zealots"—basically, Hillary Clinton's whole basket of deplorables, along with the charge repeated from his work more than 20 years earlier that they were "primitive" and "emotional."

Schlesinger contended, moreover, that "left-wing political correctness" is nothing worse than "an irritation and a nuisance," since it "operates in higher education," where students "are mature enough to take care of themselves." This assessment was dubious even in 1991, and is now refuted on a weekly basis by stories coming out of academia.

THE *DISUNITING OF AMERICA* WAS THE last occasion where Schlesinger was able to, in Aldous's words, "shape and enflame national debate as a public intellectual." The tensions between its arguments and ones he had made as a younger man reflect tensions in the American liberalism he championed throughout his life. Though utterly confident of its good intentions, liberalism remains unsure of how best to assemble a reliable majority in a vast, diverse country, and of the purposes and commitments that liberals stand for. Is it essential to include fiery Jacksonian nationalists in a Democratic coalition, or to make clear that they are unwelcome? Is liberalism's *raison d'être* to fulfill America's promise or expiate America's sins? For all his professional success, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s political failure to solve or clarify these questions is the most significant thing about his career. Showing how he came up short, and what that failure means for liberalism and the country, might someday make for a good book.

William Voegeli is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

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