
The Historian and Public Policy

Author(s): John Hope Franklin

Source: *The History Teacher*, May, 1978, Vol. 11, No. 3 (May, 1978), pp. 377-391

Published by: Society for History Education

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/491628>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The History Teacher*

JSTOR

The Historian and Public Policy

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

University of Chicago

MANY YEARS AGO the distinguished American historian, Carl Becker, wrote an essay entitled, "Everyman His Own Historian." From the title one might get the impression that Professor Becker was offering to surrender the field that he had mined so successfully to anyone who might come along and claim it. That was not the case! What Professor Becker was actually conceding was that every person had some notion—indeed, a rather clear notion—of what history actually is. I tend to agree with him, for the historian's experience is a confirmation of Becker's assertion. Let an historian, well-trained and careful in his research and writing, produce, say, a history of the United States for senior high school students, and then stand back—far back, please—while everyone has a go at the history and its author. Teachers, students, school administrators, parents, politicians,

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN is John Matthews Manly Distinguished Service Professor of History at the University of Chicago. A graduate of Fisk University, with a Ph.D. from Harvard, he taught at St. Augustine's College, North Carolina College, Howard University, and Brooklyn College before going to Chicago in 1964. In 1962–1963 he was Pitt Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University. He is a past president of the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, the Southern Historical Association, and the Organization of American Historians, and the author of numerous books, including the widely acclaimed *From Slavery to Freedom*, *The Militant South*, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*, *The Emancipation Proclamation*, and most recently *Racial Equality in America*.

The text of this article was first delivered as the Nora and Edward Ryerson Lecture at the Center for Policy Study of the University of Chicago in 1974 and is reprinted here with permission. © The University of Chicago.

and community leaders will all begin to pass judgment. Perhaps the work is good or bad or just mediocre; but whatever they judge it to be, they do so with firmness and conviction and authority. Let a person move into a group of people and be introduced as an historian and someone will raise a question that he knows is at least as profound as any that Socrates ever raised. The actual words, carefully articulated by a voice of great personal concern, will be, "Please, Sir, tell me what the next four years will provide in the way of history." It is of no use to reply, "I am not a soothsayer; I am an historian." For the reply is likely to be, "That is precisely why I put the question to you and not to someone else."

The general public is not altogether responsible for developing some rather clear and, at times, strong views on the role of history and the historian in society. I am certain that each of us can make up a rather long list of philosophers and statesmen who have summoned history to aid them in rallying the faithful to their banner. That is what Pericles was doing in 430 B.C. when he told the Athenians that their forefathers had done much to strengthen the city against the attacks of the Spartans. That is what the deputy in the French National Assembly was doing in 1789 when he cried out: "The day of the Revelation has arrived, the bones of the victims found in the Bastille have risen at the call of French liberty. They testify against centuries of oppression and of death, prophesying the regeneration of human nature and of the life of the nations." And there is that all-too-familiar invocation of the past by Thomas Jefferson who said: "The history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these States."

One hastens to add that some of the ablest and most successful practitioners of the craft have also contributed significantly to the development of such notions. In seeking to serve what they regard as a worthy public purpose, they have often used their historical materials and insights to serve some special interest or point of view. When the United States was young and needed a sense of unity and national destiny, it was the historian who stepped forward to serve that need. George Bancroft, one of the earliest historians of the new nation, took up where Jefferson left off in the Declaration of Independence. Describing the founding of the colonies in a very special way, he said: "Tyranny and injustice peopled America with men nurtured in suffering and adversity. The history of our colonization is the history of the crimes of Europe." Just to make certain that the pages of his history would be a clarion call for the people to rally around the new republic's

standard, he declared that the American Revolution was for "the advancement of the principles of everlasting peace and universal brotherhood. A new plebeian democracy took its place by the side of the proudest empires. Religion was disenthralled from civil institutions. . . . Industry was commissioned to follow the bent of its own genius." This is what may be called the pep-rally use of history in which any similarity of the characters in the drama, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Likewise, when there was a need to promote the interests of a particular economic group or political party, the historian was available to promulgate the virtues of one party and to impugn the integrity of the other. As Pieter Geyl has observed, history has for ages been an effective weapon in party strife. In his book *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America*, published in 1925, Claude Bowers was not so much interested in democratic institutions as he was in the immaculate conception and virtuous history of the Democratic Party. In portraying Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, as a villain and in describing Jefferson, the first Secretary of State, as the able and selfless patriot who saved the nation from the treacherous Federalists, Bowers served the Democratic Party well. Then, performing above and beyond the call of duty, he virtually beatified the third president in his work, *Jefferson in Power*, published in 1936. When one recalls that in 1939 the Democratic President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, appointed Bowers United States Ambassador to Chile, it can hardly be said that partisan history does not have its own rewards!

In virtually every area where evidence from the past is needed to support the validity of a given proposition, the historian can be found who will provide the evidence that is needed. This is as true in a discussion of whether democratic institutions had their origins in the German forests or on the American frontier as it is in the search for a valid historical explanation for the foibles and idiosyncrasies that characterize race relations in the United States. Two examples will suffice, one having to do with blacks, the other with Chinese.

Historians have usually been prepared to provide facile and quick explanations and justifications for the subordinate place of Negroes in American life. Some have assumed the role of physical anthropologists or biologists and have argued that blacks occupy a lowly place because of their tragically innate inferiority. Others have become, for the moment, sociologists and have argued that the structure of American society calls for homogeneity or complete assimilation, for which blacks could not, under any circumstances, qualify. Still others have

been content with the explanation advanced by a noted historian of the South, Ulrich B. Phillips. In his essay "The Central Theme of Southern History," Phillips declared that the unifying principle of Southern history had been "the common resolve indomitably maintained" by the white man that the South "shall be and remain a white man's country. . . . The consciousness of a function in these premises, whether expressed with the frenzy of a demagogue or maintained with a patrician's quietude, is the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of southern history." Apparently, the tragic fact of history was sufficient to justify the tragic fact of circumstance. One should add that by Southerner Phillips, of course, meant a white Southerner, ignoring the fact that more than one third of that region's population consisted of black Southerners.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when Americans began to agitate to bar East Asians from coming into the country, they summoned the so-called facts of history to support them. In 1902 the American Federation of Labor declared that "the free immigration of Chinese would be for all purposes an invasion by Asiatic barbarians, against whom civilization in Europe has been frequently defended, fortunately for us." The Federation did not bother to examine or acknowledge the indisputable fact that the Turks who had invaded Europe were *not* Chinese. Nor did the Federation concern itself with the crucial historical fact that the real Asian barbarians against whom they were *not* railing were assimilating quite well among their American hosts who, after all, had themselves been European barbarians! And the Federation ignored completely the indisputable historical fact that the Chinese had developed a high level of civilization centuries before European civilization reached a comparable level.

But one must attempt to distinguish between the historian's role, on the one hand, in supporting causes or offering explanations and justifications for the position to which they are already committed and, on the other, in trying to assist in the search for solutions to difficult problems in the area of public policy. It seems to me that one role is essentially partisan and defensive and is understandable even when it is indefensible. The other is essentially positive and affirmative and is more interested in how historical events can provide some basis for desirable change. It is a distinction that may not always seem clear to some or, indeed, may not even be regarded as defensible. It is one, however, that can provide a basis for a discussion of the historian and public policy.

The constructive role of the historian in public policy issues in the United States was suggested as early as 1908 in an important case that

Louis D. Brandeis argued before the United States Supreme Court. Brandeis claimed that states had the power to prescribe maximum hours of employment of women in laundries. This imaginative student of law *and* history, who would later sit on the United States Supreme Court, presented an enormous brief that not only pointed out the conditions of work that led to excessive fatigue of women workers, but what the experience of women had been, over time, in many parts of the world. On the basis of his findings he concluded that laws regulating the hours of women's work and limiting their work day to ten hours were fully justified. Even if the Brandeis brief would not impress the leaders of the women's liberation movement in 1978, it had a profound effect on the justices of the Supreme Court in 1908. From that point on, as the Court decided for the women in this case, historical as well as sociological evidence was admissible in crucial legal and constitutional questions having to do with the human condition.

Almost fifty years after Brandeis made his presentation to the United States Supreme Court, that high judicial body directly influenced the emergence of the historian as an important participant in the determination of public policy. In seeking a basis for deciding the grave constitutional questions raised in the school desegregation cases in 1953 the Court asked several questions of legal counsel that historians were better prepared to answer than any other social scientists. In the 1952 October Term, counsel for the children who sought to break down segregation in the public schools had argued that racial segregation was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution that provided equal protection of the laws for all persons, regardless of race. At the end of the term in 1953 the Court asked counsel on each side to assist it by answering the questions it propounded: "What evidence is there that the Congress which submitted and the State legislatures and conventions which ratified the Fourteenth Amendment [in 1868] contemplated or did not contemplate, understood or did not understand, that it would abolish [racial] segregation in public schools?" The Court also wanted to know from counsel that if neither the Congress nor the states understood that the Fourteenth Amendment required the immediate abolition of segregation in public schools, was it the understanding of the framers of the Amendment that future Congresses might have the power to abolish such segregation or that the Court could construe the Amendment as abolishing such segregation of its own force?

These searching and quite difficult questions sent legal counsel scurrying not to the history books but to the historians! The NAACP Legal Defense Fund provided the principal counsel for the plaintiffs.

It recognized the crucial importance of the questions raised by the Court and consequently the Defense Fund assembled a dozen or so historians and other specialists to come up with the answers. It was the historians who then went scurrying to the sources, to read the minutes of the 1865–1866 Joint Committee on Reconstruction, the debates in Congress and in the legislatures that ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, the private correspondence of key figures of the Reconstruction period after the Civil War, and to survey public reaction and response to the events in Washington and the several states. The historians wrote at least a score of working papers for legal counsel, held innumerable conferences and seminars for the legal staff, and made themselves available for questions as well as additional assignments arising from the discussions. The test proved to be a test of the historians' physical stamina as well as their professional skill. Working week after week from September to December 1953, they became accustomed to the work habits of Thurgood Marshall, the Chief Counsel for the Legal Defense Fund, even if those work habits did not delight them. He could say as casually at midnight as he could say at high noon, "Suppose we take a ten minute break."

The historians and the lawyers were an unusually effective team. The historians provided data that traced the evolution of the concept of equality, with its culmination in the writing and ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment. They showed how the pre-Civil War views of the radical abolitionists dominated the egalitarian thinking of the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment. They were able to show, moreover, how the intent of the framers of the Amendment had been frustrated and vitiated by the separate but equal doctrine which, the lawyers contended, was conceived in error. (This doctrine had been set forth by the Supreme Court in 1896 when the justices said that there was no violation in segregating people by race as long as facilities were equal.) The lawyers were then able to take the materials provided by the historians, place them in a legal framework, and by tracing legal precedents as well as changes in the political and social climate, argue quite convincingly that the original intent of the Fourteenth Amendment had indeed been nullified by the actions of its enemies, who were racial segregationists.

Using the findings of the historians, the lawyers argued that the "history of segregation laws reveals that their main purpose was to organize the community upon the basis of a superior white and an inferior Negro caste." The lawyers sounded very much like historians when they said: "history buttresses and gives particular content to the recent admonition of this Court that 'whatever else the framers [of the

Fourteenth Amendment] sought to achieve, it is clear that the matter of primary concern was the establishment of equality in the enjoyment of basic civil and political rights and the preservation of those rights from discriminatory action on the part of the States based on considerations of race and color.' ” The historians had found the lawyers to be apt, even adroit, students of history!

It is not possible, of course, to assess the influence of the historians' findings on the Court's decision which outlawed segregation in the public schools. Perhaps its influence was great, perhaps not. But the Court had asked questions that only historians could answer; and deciding in favor of the plaintiffs, the Court also decided in favor of the historians. Under the circumstances the temptation is great indeed to argue that the historians played an important part in deciding the issue of segregation in the public schools. In any event, they had answered the call to participate in an important public policy question; and it would seem that their participation had been effective. In any case, the more ardent historians who participated in the case were not at all modest in the claims they made that they contributed substantially to the decision that ended racial segregation in the nation's public schools.

The dispute over segregation in the late 1940's and early 1950's brought forth another quite unique use of historical evidence in the effort to break both the law and the custom of segregation. As some Americans began to inveigh against racial segregation and to fight it in public discussion as well as in the courts, other Americans contended that racial segregation was *so deeply imbedded* in American ethos and practice that it was virtually ineradicable. They assumed that things had always been that way. "Or if not always, then 'since slavery times,' or 'since the War,' or 'since Reconstruction.'" Some even thought of the system of racial segregation as existing along with African slavery. It was the distinguished historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward, who, recognizing the distortions and inaccuracies that arose from such assumptions, decided to try to set the record straight. If he could show that much of the legal segregation of the races was as recent as it was vagarious, then those who defended it could not fall back on the specious argument that things had always been that way.

Woodward decided to do what no proponents of segregation had ever bothered to do, or, for that matter, what no opponents of segregation had done. He went back to the historical record and examined the origins of some of the segregationist laws and practices. He did not attempt to show that there had been *no* legal segregation until late in

the nineteenth century. The time-honored practice of racial segregation in schools, churches, and the army clearly indicated that a considerable amount of racial segregation had existed much earlier. Nor was he interested, in this instance, in writing a definitive history of racial segregation. Much more research than he had done would be required for such an undertaking. (I once wrote an article under the impressive and comprehensive title, "A History of Racial Segregation in the United States." But in those nine pages I could not have even covered the subject of the segregation of dogs and cats of black and white owners in the cemeteries of the United States.) Woodward was content to make a modest contribution to the current debate by suggesting that segregation was neither as universal in origin nor as venerable in age as many on both sides of the argument assumed that it was. Because of the lack of basic research in the field, he believed that he would make mistakes; and he welcomed corrections on the part of his readers.

Woodward's book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, is a notable example of the historian's participation in a public policy discussion. As brief as it is, it has much to say about the uneven hand with which the South meted out its laws to disfranchise, segregate, and create a permanently subordinate Negro caste. Those who argued that blacks had not voted in any elections since Reconstruction ended in 1877 seemed quite unaware of the fact that several blacks were elected to the United States Congress in the 1890's and that literally hundreds of them held local elective offices in many parts of the South as late as 1900. Those who claimed that the Democratic Party had always been the exclusive domain of the white man did not know that some blacks, at the urging of whites, voted the Democratic ticket until the end of the nineteenth century and that the Democratic white primary is in fact a twentieth-century phenomenon, or aberration or, if you will, monstrosity. Those who said that the races had always been separated did not understand that some states did not adopt laws to segregate the races on railroad trains and in waiting rooms until the end of the century and that the bulk of the segregation statutes date from the 1890's or later.

Woodward did not deny the existence of widespread anti-Negro feeling, better known as Negrophobia, or long-held views of Negro inferiority. These were indisputable facts which no amount of research or arguing could eradicate; and he did not desire to do so. As a matter of fact, he *did* see an increase in racism, or Negrophobia, brought on by uncertainties and anxieties in the political and economic spheres. He *did* see that the belief in Negro inferiority had been

bolstered by those who subscribed to Social Darwinism and by those who practiced social and political demagoguery. But what he saw most clearly—and what he wanted his contemporaries to see—was that the arguments favoring the sanctity and veneration of segregation could not prevail because they were not grounded in fact and that segregation was merely another gambit in the South's determination to have its own way in the crucial matter of race relations. The South, moreover, was ambivalent, uncertain, shifty, and unclear. Today, there was no segregation; tomorrow there would be. What was true in one county was not necessarily true in another. The laws in one state were quite different from the laws in another state. In the face of all this, it was difficult to argue that pervasive and comprehensive segregation had always been and always would be. Racists would have to find some other argument, one that had some shred of validity and credibility in their desperate attempt to hold on to segregation. Woodward believed that they would not be able to find it.

Indeed, as Woodward expected, there were those who criticized him, primarily for not doing what he did not undertake to do, namely, to prove that there had been no segregation until the 1890's. Others gleefully called attention to some early segregation statute that he had overlooked or that he did not know existed. Several years ago when I took my seminar to North Carolina to do research I recall one of my students who, with great delight, informed me that he had just discovered that Raleigh, North Carolina, had racially segregated cemeteries in 1865 and that "poor" Professor Woodward apparently knew nothing about them. I said that in all probability he did not know about Raleigh cemeteries; then I asked my student to go and re-read Woodward's preface in his book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Such findings detracted little from Woodward's argument that segregation statutes and practices were uneven and that most of the laws came much later.

There is no way of knowing what effect Woodward's book had on the dispute that was raging when he wrote it. One doubts that it converted many segregationists or that it persuaded many legislators to believe that they could safely vote to repeal laws that separated the races. But it was an eloquent affirmation of the point that in a public policy question such as racial segregation, it was possible to distort and exploit the past for the wildest and most pernicious purposes. It was, moreover, a significant contribution to the discussion and, perhaps, may even have helped prepare the ground when the segregation statutes themselves slipped largely into disuse after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Whenever a Negro American traveled in the

South after 1964 and noticed the range of services available to him in hotels, restaurants, and other places of public accommodation, he would perhaps be inclined to challenge William Graham Sumner's 1907 dictum that "stateways cannot change folkways." He might also be inclined to agree with C. Vann Woodward, who had argued in 1955 that since segregation statutes were neither very old nor very sacred, it made no sense to argue that they could never be changed.

The area in which the historian participates in public policy issues has grown enormously in recent years, thanks to the increasing use made of historians by the several levels of government. Today virtually every department in the executive branch of the United States government has its staff of historians, ranging from the highly esteemed branch of historical policy research in the U.S. Department of State to the rather modest historical section in the National Park Service in the U.S. Department of the Interior. These persons, many of whom are very talented and highly trained, perform yeoman service in their roles as participants in policy formulation and decision-making in their respective departments.

It is, of course, important that the Department of State have experts who can provide the historical background of United States foreign policy in, say, Southeast Asia or Western Europe or South America. Surely, the need for historians and other students of Southeast Asia became obvious when the United States found itself deep in the morass of the internal affairs of Indo-China without an adequate understanding of the historical background on which to base a sound public policy. It is likewise important that the National Park Service know something of, say, the land conservation policies and the way they were administered before the Park Service came into formal existence in 1916. These, however, are essentially service functions; and the historians who perform them have a relationship to their departments that is understandably supportive of the team to which they belong. It is no reflection on the ability or even the integrity of official historians if one should assert that their independence in speaking out on controversial public policy issues is quite limited, especially if their views do not coincide with those of their departments.

When he was President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt was his own historian in formulating the historical basis for matters of public policy. A close student of history and a future President of the American Historical Association, the aggressive-minded President believed that armed force and military rule were fully justifiable methods of dealing with "backward peoples." The Chinese, he insisted,

lacked the qualities that to him spelled civilization. If the United States fell into the hands of "the futile sentimentalists of the international arbitration type," he warned, then it would be reduced to the "timidity and inefficiency" of the Chinese. This dim view of the Chinese did not stem from his ignorance of the rich culture of the Chinese, but from his racial intolerance and his lack of respect for a people who failed to use their own culture and civilization to fight for a more important place in the family of nations. It was this view of the past and the present that not only influenced U.S. policy toward China for a full generation but that set the tone of U.S. foreign policy in general.

One cannot be certain that official historians, whether holding elective office or merely civil servants, will always serve the best interests of the public. For, as Herbert Butterfield has reminded us, when historians are in the service of the government and the public policy of that government rests on a certain set of historical precedents, it is difficult for men to place truth above public advantage when public advantage might mean the winning of a war, the circumvention of a diplomatic crisis, the covering of a reputation, or even an improvement in general welfare. Their commitment is to a policy that, having been determined and agreed upon, does not seek alternatives to the same or a similar end and rejects differences or challenges as inimical to its objectives.

It would seem highly important, therefore, that historians with *no* governmental connections should participate in the discussion of public policy with that independence of mind and spirit that their private position affords. Indeed, from their relatively detached position, they could engage, challenge, debate, and criticize their governmental colleagues who are a part of the apparatus where public policy is determined. Historians on the outside could raise questions about the operation of a given policy that is defended on the ground that it is in line with historical public policy in that area. Indeed, and by the same token, the outsiders could challenge the traditional public policy if on the basis of their examination of the record they find it to be out of line with historical facts as well as current interests and needs. They, most of all, could challenge the sanctity and validity of a traditional policy that might not even be the tradition but that is followed for the sake of a so-called tradition and not necessarily for the sake of the public interest.

In 1935, for example, the manual of the Federal Housing Administration stated that in order to maintain community stability, real estate properties should continue to be occupied by the same racial and social classes as in the past. On the basis of this stated public

policy, segregated public housing was erected with the support of the federal government all over the United States. It is lamentable that some outside historian had not challenged the policy and stated then and there that since the Civil War, blacks and whites lived next door to each other—and were still doing so in 1935—in Richmond, Raleigh, Charleston, Mobile, New Orleans, and dozens of other places. In the absence of such a challenge the policy stood and, in the words of one housing authority, it did more to entrench housing bias in the American neighborhoods than any court could undo by a ruling.

I do not know how many historians there are today in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. A decade ago, when several Indian tribes were suing the United States government to recover many millions of dollars from proceeds of oil lands that the Indians claimed as theirs, the Bureau became suddenly conscious of the value of historians in supporting or challenging the claims of the Indians. The government had its historians, and the Indians had theirs. The result was a very lively debate, not altogether uncongenial but terribly expensive, over the relative merits of the Indian claims. The tribes recovered enormous sums through the courts, on the basis of the evidence that historians provided regarding treaty claims.

One wonders if the Bureau of Indian Affairs continues to have an appreciation of how historians can assist the Bureau in the formulation of public policy regarding these first Americans. The history of American Indian policy is itself not only sordid but enormously complicated in every possible way. The government has vacillated between a policy of intransigent hostility and one of fawning paternalism and back again. Indians have been “Uncle Sam’s Stepchildren,” “The Noble Savages,” and the enemies of progress who in the eyes of some would better be dead because they are red. Somewhere, there needs to be a recognition and understanding of the extent as well as the reasons for vacillation in public policy in this area. Encroachments on Indian lands, the unilateral abrogation of treaties with the Indians, and barbaric massacres of thousands of Indians by white men are factors that must be considered. The confrontation between Indians in South Dakota and the United States government is a clear example of the need to examine past relations and problems as a first step toward resolving the impasse.

If the historians in the Bureau cannot or will not indicate how and why these shifts in policy add up to a monumentally immoral public posture, then historians outside the Bureau should have the temerity and the courage to do so. This is not to suggest that historians should provide justification and defense for the actions of American Indians

in seizing the rock of Alcatraz or in seizing the Office of the Bureau itself or in taking over the South Dakota reservation. It is to suggest that the historic shifts, uncertainties, and vacillations have served to exacerbate the situation unduly and have driven reasonable men to violence. It is the role of the detached, independent historian to point out the historic fallacies in American public policy in this crucially important area.

Few areas, if any, are more important than foreign policy in the requirement that public policy issues involved in it should reflect the highest integrity in their resolution and formulation. Likewise, few areas, if any, are more in need of the perspective and critical evaluation that historians can provide. Not that the United States needs to be saved from isolationism, for it has really never been isolationist. Not that it needs to be reminded of its role as keeper of the peace, for it has never been successfully cast in such a role. Not that it needs to be kept mindful of its duty as protector of the national rights and territorial integrity of the smaller nations, for it has never consistently functioned in that role. Most of all, the issues of foreign policy of the United States or, indeed, of any nation, need to be regularly canvassed and re-examined in order to define, more precisely, what its posture should be toward other nations. What is the historian's role in such an examination?

In foreign policy, perhaps more than in any other area, the world's leaders tend to speak of their own nations' historical role in encouraging peoples of the world to become self-governing and to seek the paths of peace. Quite frequently, they summon the events of the past to support their current posture. Almost invariably, it is a misleading posture. Britain was not seeking to encourage self-government in India during her several centuries of control of the sub-continent. The Soviet Union can hardly be accused of protecting the right of self-government in its move into Hungary in 1956 or its intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The United States had no deep interest in the self-government of Haiti when the Marines moved into that country in 1916 and remained there for eighteen years. Without emphasizing unnecessarily the moral dimensions of the foreign policy of nations, it is reasonable to assert that the historians ought at least to keep the record straight and make an attempt to keep their nations honest by calling attention to the disparity between historical assertions on the one hand and the facts of history on the other.

One supposes that every nation in the world wants to be regarded as peace-loving and that it pursues a foreign policy well calculated to preserve the peace. It is so easy for a nation to slip into a warlike

posture with the claim that it has to do so in order to maintain the peace. The United States has done it many times, both in the past century and in the present one. So have many other nations. It is comforting and reassuring for a nation to assume such a high-minded posture. But there is no guarantee that the *claim* of being a lover of the peace and a keeper of the peace is, at any given time, an accurate statement of a nation's foreign policy position. Thus, the United States has been involved in no less than seven major foreign wars since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This is not to argue that such a record qualifies the United States as a warmonger, but the record of having to resort to war so often in order to keep the peace does not qualify it as a peacemaker, either. In going to war so often in the name of peace, freedom, and democratic institutions, the record is a most difficult one to defend. The historian cannot and should not have any interest in defending such a rule if, indeed, the facts suggest that innumerable considerations entered into the decision to fight not only peoples in distant lands but nearby neighbors as well.

As a nation views its history and the various positions that it has taken, it is not difficult to conclude that its postures have been mixed and exist on several levels of morality. At times, in the case of the United States, at least, its public policy has been humane, healthy, and worthy; it has helped earthquake victims, fed starving peoples, and fought the Nazi barbarians. At other times, it has been bereft of many or any praiseworthy objectives. It has upheld corrupt regimes abroad, interfered in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, and taken territories belonging to others. It is the function of the historian to keep before the people, with as much clarity as possible, the different lines of action that have been taken, the several, often complicated reasons for such action, and to point to the conflicts and inconsistencies, the contradictions and illogicalities, and the defects and deficiencies when they exist. One might argue that the historian is the conscience of his nation, if honesty and consistency are factors that nurture the conscience. Perhaps that is too much to claim for the historian who, after all, is not in the business of protecting the morals of a people.

It would be enough if in our time the historian were to look at our many public policies that we claim to be firmly based in the hallowed past and see if that is in fact the case. As we celebrate the bicentennial of our national independence and as we pursue many of our public policies in the name of the founding fathers—our black policy, our red policy, our foreign policy, or whatever—the historian and, indeed, all of us should take a hard look at what we ascribe to the founding fathers. But the time is at hand for us to recognize the fact that deep

re- veneration is one thing and uncritical approbation is quite another. If we cannot celebrate their achievements and, at the same time, recognize their human frailties which led them to make numerous mistakes, we are unworthy of the legacy we claim to celebrate.

The people, yes, the people, shall judge; but they require a sound basis for making judgments. They will have that basis if and when they know what has happened, why it has happened and, consequently, how the public policies growing out of historical events or shaping those events can serve the common good. If, then, the people prefer to ignore their past mistakes and prefer to live in a world of fantasy and make-believe, they will deserve to suffer the fate of repeating the grave errors that they could easily have avoided.