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Author(s): James A. Nuechterlein

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Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and The Discontents of Postwar American Liberalism

James A. Nuechterlein

American society over the past dozen years has undergone a general and continuing crisis. Almost everyone agrees on that point, but on the deeper meaning and significance of the crisis, on its origins and precise nature, there is massive disagreement. From all points of the political spectrum flow streams of mutually exclusive analyses and prescriptions.

Yet in this confusion of voices, there is one element common to almost all diagnoses. Virtually every report on the national condition includes the suggestion that the crisis of American society relates in some way, indicative if not causative, to a crisis in American liberalism. It is not radicals and conservatives alone who insist on this. Liberals themselves have experienced in recent years a mood of uncertainty without parallel in American history; a good deal of contemporary liberal comment begins with the assumption that "we have failed."

Much of this deserves to be received with skepticism. Most of the criticism of liberalism from left or right is self-serving and finally contradictory, with radicals denouncing liberals because they are not socialists and conservatives berating them for a presumed capitulation to collectivism. Criticism of liberalism from within too often takes the form of an unattractive self-flagellation that appears at once uncomfortably near to self-hatred and yet not wholly sincere or fully meant. The record of liberalism in the sixties was in any case not so wretched as is often suggested. For all the decline in many ways in the quality of life in America, there were still substantial gains: poor people in general and blacks in particular, for example, found their situations considerably improved. As for foreign policy, the disaster of Vietnam was traceable less to liberal political ideology than to a series of specific miscalculations and blunders related only tangentially to underlying assumptions. Among the prices we are still paying for our recent crises is a tendency to a kind of analytical overleap, an instinct to overinterpretation that sees in every discrete social ill signs and portents of imminent moral, intellectual, and political disaster.

Yet it remains indisputable that things have come undone

recently, and given the traditional hegemony of liberalism over American political life, our national difficulties almost necessarily involve difficulties in liberal thought and strategy. Any inquiry into our current social distempers, then, must look at recent liberal history for clues to their causes.

It is in this context that a close study of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., as historian, thinker, and activist suggests its usefulness. Schlesinger is not only a distinguished student of the national past, he is also a man who has had a substantial effect on postwar American liberalism. The odyssey of the Vital Center, a term he invented and whose substance finds embodiment in his own political journeyings, provides a convenient image for an analysis of recent liberal politics. Schlesinger has had a continuing and major intellectual role in the ongoing definition of the Vital Center's ethos and in its persistent search for a usable dynamic.

One can follow, in tracing the marches and countermarches, the difficulties, tensions, and possible contradictions of Schlesinger's own liberalism, a substantial part of the larger story of liberalism in our time. And there is more: in his historical and other writings Schlesinger sought to establish his version of the Vital Center as more than the preferred political program for contemporary affairs; he sought as well to establish it as *the* legitimate tradition of American liberal democracy. In dealing with this larger myth-making function of Schlesinger's work, we confront some of the fundamental issues and problems of the entire American experience.

Schlesinger's political generation (he was born in 1917) found its liberalism given distinctive form by encounters with three fundamental forces: Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, which taught it optimism; Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, which reminded it that evil could exist on the political left; and Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism, which warned it of the limits of man and the dangers of utopianism.¹ Out of interaction of these forces came the shape of Vital Center politics in the forties and early fifties.

Liberal history and politics were virtually bred into Schlesinger. His father was a distinguished professor of history at Harvard and he was descended on his mother's side from George Bancroft, an active Jacksonian Democrat and a great nineteenth-century whig-progressive historian. Schlesinger quickly acted to perpetuate the

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center* (1949; Boston, 1962), p. xxiii. Further citations are all to Schlesinger's writings unless otherwise noted.

family tradition; he published his Harvard honors thesis on Orestes Brownson in 1939, and after the war published his pathbreaking reinterpretation of Jacksonian democracy, which won him the 1945 Pulitzer prize for history and a Harvard appointment.²

From the beginning, Schlesinger's history was informed by his politics. He studied *The Age of Jackson* with contemporary allusions, and specifically noted that the pattern of social forces in Jackson's day was "virtually identical with that of the New Deal"; indeed, he found in Jacksonian democracy the origins of the entire liberal tradition in America.³

At the heart of his historical and political analysis lay a theory of class conflict; in his first book, he praised Brownson for seeing that conflict as "the dynamic force in the evolution of society."⁴ At the same time, Schlesinger carefully dissociated his analysis from orthodox Marxism, and he dismissed modern Marxists as "incapable of analyzing any contemporary situation to any useful effect."⁵ In reality, Schlesinger was speaking of group rather than class conflict. The central theme of American liberal democracy was for him the struggle between the business community and all other groups in the society. To be a liberal meant, in operational terms, to be above all else an opponent of business power. From this perspective, Andrew Jackson's titanic struggle against the Bank of the United States in the 1830's became the prototypical event of the nation's political history; in sustaining Jackson, the American people "made unmistakably clear for all time their conviction that basic economic decisions were matters of democratic responsibility and could not be left in private and irresponsible hands."⁶ This view of liberalism served one of Schlesinger's primary political purposes—the legitimizing of the New Deal through the establishment of suitable historical antecedents. Schlesinger repeatedly insisted that the New Deal represented not the aberration from the Amer-

² *A Pilgrim's Progress: Orestes A. Brownson* (Boston, 1966; originally published as *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim's Progress*, 1939); *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945).

³ "The Age of Jackson," *New Republic*, 114 (25 March, 1946), 410; "The Legacy of Andrew Jackson," *American Mercury*, 64 (February, 1947), 170-73.

⁴ *A Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 82.

⁵ On the first point, see *Age of Jackson*, p. 307, and *Vital Center*, pp. 172-73; on the latter, "Can Willie Save His Party?" *Nation*, 153 (6 December, 1941), 563.

⁶ "Democracy; What Does It Mean?" *Vital Speeches*, 14 (15 April, 1948), 401-02. Emphasis added.

ican tradition that its opponents portrayed but rather that tradition's triumphant culmination.

Schlesinger's early faith in liberal democracy combined a pronounced streak of populism with an intense commitment to strong leadership. Andrew Jackson typified the almost mystical union between the democratic leader and the people: "He grew stronger after every contact with the people. In last analysis, there lay the secret of his strength: his deep natural understanding of the people. . . . The people called him, and he came, like the great folk heroes, to lead them out of captivity and bondage."⁷ In not dissimilar perspectives were Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy later celebrated.

The forces of the business community against which democratic leaders perpetually struggled disqualified themselves from political leadership by their narrow preoccupation with class interests, their consistent political incompetence, and their lack of vigor and purpose. Schlesinger sketched an outline of American history in which an inept business class, increasingly enfeebled by its lack of a will to govern, created inevitable crises whenever in power from which it and the rest of society had regularly to be rescued by the "radical democracy." By the late forties, Schlesinger was so fearful of business rule that he feared an America returned to conservative control "might be delivered through the incompetence of the right into the hands of the totalitarians of the left."⁸

Yet for all his opposition to the power of business in politics, Schlesinger was no socialist. He recognized capitalism's strengths, particularly its economic vitality and its commitment to a free and open society. More strongly still, he recognized socialism's weaknesses: its problems with amassing the necessary information and skill truly to plan and direct an economy and, above all, its dangerous propensity towards the concentration of power in a few hands. The real project for the democratic left was to protect capitalists from their own excesses; Schlesinger insisted that "the object of liberalism has never been to destroy capitalism, as conservatism invariably claims—only to keep the capitalists from destroying it." Variety of ownership and control was the answer, "as much variety . . . as is consistent with energetic action by the gov-

⁷ *Age of Jackson*, p. 43.

⁸ *Vital Center*, p. xxiv.

⁹ *Age of Jackson*, pp. 522, 521; see also "The Future of Socialism: The Perspective Now," *Partisan Review*, 14 (May-June, 1947).

ernment."⁹ The prophet of the new radicalism was not Karl Marx but John Maynard Keynes; the triumph of the New Deal was the triumph of the middle way between unregulated capitalism and orthodox socialism.

The dynamic required to prevent this Vital Center from slipping into a slack and banal centrism was the creative social conflict provided by perpetual group struggle. Where Marxism envisioned that struggle as warfare to the apocalyptic death, Schlesinger's version kept it, through an emphasis on gradualism, pragmatism, and parliamentarianism, as a "perpetual tension" issuing not in actual warfare or final resolution but in an ongoing balancing and rebalancing of social forces which offered society the best guarantee of freedom, stability, and progress.¹⁰

¹⁰ It must be noted that on one critical point of the history of class conflict in America, Schlesinger's treatment was evasive and even misleading. Eager as always to absolve the New Deal of importing alien ideas into American politics, Schlesinger traced the idea of class conflict back to the origins of the nation. "The Founding Fathers disagreed," he wrote, "not over the reality of class conflict, but over its origin: whether, as Hamilton and John Adams claimed, it was the inevitable result of natural differences in the talents of man, or, as Jefferson and John Taylor of Caroline claimed, it was the result of unnatural tyrannies, imposed by fraud and maintained by force." Schlesinger went on to quote Jackson in apparent support of the Jeffersonian "radical democratic" interpretation. His use of the quotation, however, distorted Jackson's meaning. The quotation follows, the words emphasized being those Schlesinger omitted and replaced with ellipses.

It is to be regretted, that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of Government to their selfish purposes. *Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth can not be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally justified to protection by law; but when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government.*

Schlesinger's use of the quote (which is from Jackson's veto of the recharter of the Bank of the United States, July 10, 1832) is in *Vital Center*, p. 172; the full quotation can be found in James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 3 (New York, 1897), 1153. The point at issue is not simply what Jackson really meant or what the American liberal tradition actually involves. The judgment involved in deciding whether class conflicts and differences stem from natural human distinctions and inequalities or are artificially created by fraudulent and coercive means is fundamental to any political philosophy. It is striking that Schlesinger, aside from his quite inadequate handling of the issue in this case, appears to pay little or no attention to this crucial problem.

For Schlesinger's generation, concern over the problem of power in socialism stemmed from the revelations of the late 30's regarding Stalinist Russia. Knowledge of the labor camps and the mass purges bred a new skepticism toward unlimited state power and a renewed commitment to individual liberties.

From the outset of his career, Schlesinger distrusted Soviet purposes. Even during the war years, when the common struggle against fascism brought a warming in American attitudes toward the USSR, Schlesinger remained without illusions concerning Soviet-American relations once Hitler was eliminated. By the late 1940's, Schlesinger was writing passionately of Stalinism as a complete totalitarian system, and viewing the conflict between the U.S. and the USSR as a permanent one: "A 'permanent' crisis? Well, a generation or two anyway, permanent in one's own lifetime, permanent in the sense that no international miracle, no political sleight-of-hand will do away overnight with the tensions between ourselves and Russia." Yet for all his support of President Truman's strong anti-Soviet stance, Schlesinger insisted that containment no more meant intimidation than it did appeasement and he warned that America "must not succumb to demands for an anti-Soviet crusade or a preventive war, nor permit reactionaries in the buffer states to precipitate conflicts in defense of their own obsolete prerogatives." He understood as well the subtler dangers of anti-Communism. We must not, he said, permit ourselves "to become the slaves of Stalinism, as any man may become the slave of the things he hates."¹¹ It was essential that a genuine radicalism be sustained in Western Europe and America, that the non-Communist left of the Atlantic community remain as left as it was non-Communist. For Schlesinger, freedom's most effective friends in Europe were democratic socialists on the model of Léon Blum in France or Aneurin Bevan in England; in America they were to be found among the veterans and heirs of the New Deal, the left-liberal politicians, intellectuals, and labor leaders who associated themselves with the philosophy of Americans for Democratic Action.

The confrontation with totalitarianism contributed significantly to a revised view among many liberals, Schlesinger included, concerning human nature and the modern condition. Schlesinger's general perspective in *The Vital Center* was distinctly som-

¹¹ *Vital Center*, pp. 9-10, 235-36, 188.

ber. With traditional faiths no longer accessible, with modernity's dreams of redemption through science, reason, and technology destroyed in global war and mass brutality, with the weight and impersonality of industrial society seeming to demolish the old shelters of community and individual identity, the result was lives "empty of belief" lived in "quiet desperation." Yet history offered no respite or escape. The imperatives of industrialization required of modern man that he "organize beyond his moral and emotional means"; here could be found "the fundamental cause of our distempers." If such was man's condition, then the traditional liberal belief in progress was no longer tenable. The basic optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had assumed man's essential rationality and goodness, but the twentieth had revealed his depravity. It was time, Schlesinger argued, for contemporary thinkers to take seriously again orthodox Christianity's perspectives on man (if not its theology), to listen with respect when Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr spoke of the reality and power of Original Sin.¹² A responsible liberalism would have to discard its progressive sentimentalities and accept man as he was, limited and flawed; and it would have to accept as well the compromises, complicities, and uncertainties of responsible political action.

The threats to America from Soviet expansionism abroad and creeping social malaise at home made it essential that freedom regain its vitality and become once more "a fighting faith." Yet democracy's commitment to tolerance and diversity, its basis in compromise and consent, made such a faith hard to come by. Its creation and nourishment depended on the maintenance of certain fruitful social tensions: between individualism and community, freedom and security, private initiative and public power. The tensions had to remain forever unresolved, for democracy was a process and not a conclusion; the struggle was without end, the millennium unattainable. "All important problems are insoluble," Schlesinger concluded, "that is why they are important." The good came not in ultimate resolutions but in the struggle itself: "The new radicalism derives its power from an acceptance of conflict—an acceptance combined with a determination to create a social framework where conflict issues, not in excessive anxiety, but in creativity. The center is vital; the center must hold."¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 244, 6, 38-39, 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 254, 255.

What is most striking in *The Vital Center* is the distance between its philosophy and its politics, the movement from conservative assumptions to liberal conclusions. Schlesinger himself, looking back twenty years later, noted a "combination in the book of a certain operational optimism with a certain historical and philosophical pessimism." The note of pessimism recurred frequently in Schlesinger's immediate postwar writings. "History is not a redeemer," he insisted; it is in fact "a tragedy in which we are all involved, whose keynote is anxiety and frustration, not progress and fulfillment." In denying Whittaker Chambers' claim that anti-Communism must be founded on religious belief, Schlesinger argued that the issue was rather "the sense of human limitation, of human fallibility, of . . . the 'moral incompleteness' of man." Doubters as well as believers could "be tentative and experimental in history and humble and contrite before the mystery which lies beyond history."¹⁴ When one recalls the classic definition of conservatism as a sense of humility before God and history, it is quite possible to categorize Schlesinger as a philosophical conservative. Yet his politics remained unreservedly liberal as well as basically optimistic. The New Deal, whatever its flaws, had made an enviable record and it remained for Schlesinger a source of hope and of faith in democracy.

The disjunction between philosophy and politics was not necessarily a contradiction; Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the central inspiration to the "tough-minded" liberals, was, after all, a socialist in his early days and remained always a man of the left. But if the movement from realist assumptions to left-liberal politics was not impossible, neither was it at all axiomatic. The tragic vision was hardly a major perspective for most New Dealers, the majority of whom were closer in spirit to Eleanor Roosevelt than to Niebuhr. Niebuhr's theological perspectives could doubtless be made to consist with a number of political positions, but at whatever point on the political spectrum they were applied their influence would inescapably tend in a conservative direction. Niebuhrian assump-

¹⁴ "The Vital Center' Reconsidered," *Encounter*, 35 (September, 1970), 89; "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism" (1949), *The Politics of Hope* (Boston, 1963), p. 47; "Whittaker Chambers and His Witness" (1952), *The Politics of Hope*, pp. 193, 195. *Politics of Hope* is a collection of articles originally published in the period 1949-60. All citations to the book will indicate the year in which articles referred to first appeared.

tions offered no sure foundation for Schlesinger's democratic radicalism.

Nor was it clear how Schlesinger's emphasis on conflict was to sustain the liberal faith. The difficulty lay not simply in finding endurance and purpose for a struggle without resolution or even presumption of progress but also of establishing what conflict had necessarily to do with liberalism at all. For Schlesinger, the ongoing struggle was "the guarantee of freedom [and] the instrument of change; it is, above all, the source of discovery, the source of art, the source of love."¹⁵ The argument was not clearly wrong but neither was it self-evidently right; one could, for example, argue at least as plausibly that consensus and social harmony were more likely paths to the attainment of desirable social ends, particularly in an America with such an encompassing middle class. Schlesinger's rejection of liberal beliefs in human goodness and continuing social progress had greater costs than he appeared to acknowledge, for without those beliefs change was only change and the struggle out of which it came could as easily destroy as create human felicity.

The potential difficulties in the Vital Center were operational as well as philosophical. The delicate balance between antibusiness politics and procapitalist economics was not easily maintained. How did society give businessmen sufficient freedom for economic initiative and yet create a polity in which they were effectively restricted in political power? Schlesinger's social analysis, for all its emphasis on economic forces, tended regularly and almost inevitably to a separation of politics and economics. As a man of the left persuaded of capitalism's economic virtues, Schlesinger alternated ambivalently between vigorous condemnation of businessmen and uneasy acceptance of the business system. To radicals, Schlesinger's liberalism would be an exercise in futility; to conservatives, it would seem counterproductive and even somewhat perverse. Schlesinger had noted that a new depression would greatly increase the trend toward socialism; he did not foresee that an extended period of prosperity would greatly weaken the anti-business impulse.

The inclination to conservatism could be seen as well in the effects of liberal anti-Communism. The definition of the major enemy as being on the left drew the Vital Center in the opposite direction, creating tendencies toward the defense of capitalist

¹⁵ *Vital Center*, p. 255.

practices and a skepticism toward socialist ones. Already in late 1949, an essay Schlesinger wrote with Seymour Harris on the American economy revealed the effects of the cold war on domestic political thought. The essay was completely nonradical in tone, arguing essentially that capitalism worked, that Marx had been historically and analytically wrong, and that the American worker was considerably better off than anybody else in the world, including "Joe Ivanov" in Moscow. There were a few mildly reformist notes, but the overall tone of satisfaction with the existing system was unmistakable. Nowhere did the essay espouse or even acknowledge the existence of class conflict in America.¹⁶

Both the pressure of events and tendencies from within, then, acted gradually to drain the Vital Center of its vitality. For a few brief years in the late 1940's, a chastened liberalism, sustained by memories of New Deal commitments, by a foreign threat, and by a newly sophisticated view of man and society, enjoyed one of the more creative moments in its long tradition. As memories dimmed, however, and threats receded (or at least became routinized), Schlesinger and his fellow liberals had to find new perspectives for social analysis and political commitment; they had, in short, to find a new dynamic to sustain their liberal faith.

Two factors dominated the political consciousness of the 1950's: the continuing cold war with the Soviet Union and the sense of widespread domestic prosperity. Together they gave rise to the development of the consensus school of American history and politics, the sense of the extraordinary degree of commonality of purposes, values, and assumptions among most Americans throughout the national experience. Such an analysis, of course, ran counter to Schlesinger's immediate postwar emphasis on a politics of perpetual struggle and tension. To the new consciousness he made some accommodation, but he was never comfortable with consensus interpretations and he struggled throughout the decade to preserve a distinct and vigorous liberal identity, partly by recasting his original perspectives and partly by establishing new ones.

With respect to the cold war, the invasion of South Korea from the North in June 1950 convinced almost everyone of the reality of the threat of Communist expansion. After President Truman's prompt response to the Korean situation, even such a bitter op-

¹⁶ "Are We Richer Today?" *Ladies' Home Journal*, 66 (September, 1949).

ponent of his earlier containment policies as Henry Wallace rallied round the policy of collective security, a policy continued in its essential outlines under President Eisenhower. Debates over foreign policy during the rest of the decade, while often heated, focused on essentially minor matters of tactics and style, not on grand strategy or fundamental purpose. Schlesinger and other liberals offered increasingly harsh criticisms of the Eisenhower-Dulles policies, but on basic issues a bipartisan foreign policy continued in force.

From the perspective of recent years, it is startling to recall how much of the liberal criticism of the Eisenhower administration centered on the general theme that the U.S. was falling behind the USSR and on the specific fear that America's level of defense spending was inadequate to meet the Communist challenge. Already in August 1953 Schlesinger was criticizing proposed cuts in the defense budget. Korea had indicated that the atomic bomb was an inadequate and inappropriate shield for all of America's strategic needs, and the need for greater flexibility to meet limited war and other contingencies required increased military spending if the nation was to maintain its world influence.¹⁷

The emphasis on keeping up with the Russians continued through the decade, reaching its climax in the furor over the famous—and nonexistent—missile gap of the post-Sputnik years. Schlesinger was typical of liberals, however, in denying any contradiction between increased defense spending and a genuine desire for peaceful diplomacy and even international disarmament. At the same time that he was endorsing a major increase in the Strategic Air Command and in conventional ground forces, he urged continuing U.S. effort toward “enforced disarmament of all weapons,” and he was frequently critical of the absence of diplomatic initiatives from the administration. The Eisenhower policies were at once too timid and too provocative. During 1960, Schlesinger predicted that while a Kennedy administration would increase armaments, it would “arm in order to disarm” and would stand in general “for a policy of strength and moderation as against the policy of weakness and provocativeness.”¹⁸

¹⁷ “Military Force: How Much and Where?” *Reporter*, 9 (4 August, 1953).

¹⁸ “Two Views on Finletter’s ‘Power and Policy,’” *Reporter*, 11 (2 December, 1954), 32; *Kennedy or Nixon: Does It Make Any Difference?* (New York, 1960), p. 42; “The Case for Kennedy,” *New York Times Magazine*, 6 November, 1960, p. 19.

Hortatory rhetoric aside, Schlesinger's suggestions for new departures in American foreign policy were substantively modest. While frequently urging greater efforts toward détente, he conceded that the Soviet Union remained a "theological society" imbued with an unshaken sense of its own infallibility. With that concession, Schlesinger's strictures against the dogmatism and rigidity of Eisenhower's foreign policy lost much of their impact.¹⁹

The continuation of the cold war abroad made possible the rise of McCarthyism at home. In recent years, the radical revisionist critique of the liberal performance during the cold war has tended to collapse all anti-Communism into McCarthyism, to view the opposition to Communism of liberals like Schlesinger as functionally indistinguishable from the rabid anti-Communism of the far right.

Yet the distinctions which radical historians refuse to make are present in the contemporary debate. Most liberals most of the time kept a reasonable balance in the conflict between civil liberties and national security. Schlesinger's own record does not justify the attack made by a handful at the time and considerably more since that he spoke "the language of McCarthy with a Harvard accent."²⁰ Schlesinger has always been a consistent and unapologetic anti-Communist, but this did not lessen his concern for free speech or his contempt for the ideology and tactics of the McCarthyites. McCarthy and his friends at the time clearly understood that liberals like Schlesinger were their enemies, not their allies.²¹

In a sense, attacks by McCarthyites served a positive function

¹⁹ "Varieties of Communist Experience" (1960), *Politics of Hope*.

²⁰ Carey McWilliams, "The Witch Hunt's New Phase," *New Statesman and Nation*, 42 (27 October, 1951), 455.

²¹ For examples of Schlesinger's views through these years see "The U.S. Communist Party," *Life*, 21 (29 July, 1946); "What is Loyalty? A Difficult Question," *New York Times Magazine*, 2 November, 1947; "The Right to Loathsome Ideas," *Saturday Review*, 32 (14 May, 1949); "Espionage or Frame-Up?" *Saturday Review*, 33 (15 April, 1950); "Faith, Fear and Freedom," *Saturday Review*, 34 (3 February, 1951); "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review*, 19 (September, 1952); "Individual Freedom and National Security," in Schlesinger and Quincy Howe, eds., *Guide to Politics*, 1954 (New York, 1954). For a typical McCarthyite diatribe against Schlesinger, see Ralph de Toledano, "Junior's Misses," *American Mercury*, 77 (November, 1953). Schlesinger has ably defended postwar liberal anti-Communism on a number of occasions. For an excellent brief statement, see the relevant portions of his introductory essay in volume one of *The Dynamics of World Power: A Documentary History of United States Foreign Policy*, 5 vols. (New York, 1973).

for liberals in the early 1950's, since such attacks constituted one of the few issues around which they could positively unite. Liberalism seemed for a time largely defensive and uncertain. The loss of power after two decades of success was unsettling, but even more difficult to adjust to was the new situation of national prosperity. The politics of the Vital Center, flourishing in conditions of depression, appeared to flounder in the midst of prosperity.

Schlesinger was among the first to catch the new mood and explore its implications. Eisenhower's landslide victory in 1952 triggered the first wave of liberal revaluations, and Schlesinger, as an advisor and speechwriter for Adlai Stevenson, immediately sensed the significance of the defeat: the New and Fair Deals had been victims of their own success. Their reforms had helped create a new prosperity, and as depression memories faded, "the old appeals failed." The new mood raised fundamental problems for Schlesinger's political position. His liberalism rested firmly on opposition to the power of business, but he now perceived, however reluctantly, that "in the eyes of perhaps a majority of Americans (if not of this writer) the balance of power [has] been effectively redressed against the business community."²²

Schlesinger did not recant his opposition to business, but he did significantly modify it. He also shifted the grounds of his opposition away from class conflict and toward moral and even aesthetic matters. Although he still worried about the political power of business, his concern was less intense and less central to his analysis. Business remained only "on probation," but that was enough, for the time at least, to demolish the emphasis on conflict on which the Vital Center had been based; the new liberalism, Schlesinger said in 1956, "requires a spirit that aims not to indict any group in the community as a special obstacle to change but rather to rally men of good will in all groups behind programs designed to improve life in America for all Americans—a spirit that seeks, in other words, not to divide the country and aggravate its tensions, but to unite it around a revitalized sense of the public interest."²³

The problem of Republican conservatives was no longer their subservience to business as such, but simply their narrowness: "The

²² "Stevenson and the American Liberal Dilemma," *Twentieth Century*, 153 (January, 1953), 27, 28.

²³ "'We Need a Liberal Administration,'" *Reporter*, 14 (31 May, 1956), 21; "The Future of Liberalism: The Challenge of Abundance," *Reporter*, 14 (3 May, 1956), 11.

basic trouble is *not* that the Republican party represents the business community. . . . The trouble is that it represents a *single* interest. I would object just as strongly to a party which addressed itself exclusively to the welfare of labor or of farmers (or, for the that matter, of college professors)."²⁴

The movement toward the center indicated by the revised attitude toward business and class conflict revealed itself in other ways as well. The word *radical* disappeared from Schlesinger's descriptions of the legitimate left in America, and he dismissed socialism more firmly than ever as being irrelevant to modern conditions. The new moderation could be seen also in Schlesinger's scholarly work: *The Age of Roosevelt* is a far less populist or class-conscious work than *The Age of Jackson*, and is more complex and ambiguous in its social analysis than the earlier book.²⁵

Yet Schlesinger, for all his concessions to the spirit of consensus, was determined to maintain a distinct and vital liberalism. Forced to concede the essential validity of Louis Hartz's analysis of the broad liberal consensus in the American past, Schlesinger nonetheless argued that there had existed within that consensus genuine ideological conflicts. For Schlesinger, the fundamental liberal-conservative distinction, on which all else rested, now lay in that most obvious of differences, the psychological attitude toward change. As Ralph Waldo Emerson had long ago argued, one party of Americans stood for conservatism, the past, and memory; the other represented innovation, the future, and hope. The conservative instinctively opposed change, while the liberal, although never utopian, nonetheless felt "that history never stands still, that social change can better the quality of people's lives and happiness, and that the margin of human gain, however limited, is worth the effort."²⁶

²⁴ *Kennedy or Nixon?* p. 47.

²⁵ *The Crisis of the Old Order, The Coming of the New Deal, and The Politics of Upheaval* comprise the three volumes so far published of *The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston, 1957-60). My concern with Schlesinger in this essay is primarily with his political thought and not with his historical works as such, but it requires notice that *Age of Roosevelt* is not only Schlesinger's greatest achievement but one of the genuine monuments of twentieth-century American historiography. The brilliant biographical sketches, the marvelously felicitous use of quotations, the subtlety and complexity of analysis, and the command, movement, and scope of the entire work combine to make this as outstanding an example as one can point to of the art of the analytical narrative.

²⁶ "Liberalism in America: A Note for Europeans" (1956), *Politics of Hope*, p. 67.

It seemed uncertain that such a distinction could by itself produce a revitalized liberalism; most moderate conservatives could feel quite comfortable with its limited claims, especially when Schlesinger further emphasized its “realistic,” even “skeptical,” temper and its overriding mistrust of “utopianism, perfectionism, and maximalism.”²⁷ Schlesinger nonetheless attempted to pump ideological life into his new model, less, it turned out, through positive issue identification than through attacks on the esthetic, moral, and spiritual failures of conservatism, and through appeals to the need for leadership and for movement toward necessary, if highly generalized, change.

For Schlesinger, the new liberalism had to address itself more to qualitative than quantitative issues. Where New Dealers had fought economic stagnation, the new item on the liberal agenda was “spiritual unemployment.” While a meretricious consumer society turned out an immense volume of superfluous luxuries—“more gadgets and gimmicks to overwhelm our bodies and distract our minds”—there were signs everywhere of a “deep spiritual malaise” spreading through the society as “fatigue or melancholia or dry rot.”²⁸

The preoccupation with private gain blinded the society to the desperate needs of the public sector; while the national interest required increased production of public goods—“everything from schools to atomic submarines”—a privatized economy gave the nation instead “more lipstick and eye shadow.” This complacently materialistic society became also ever more homogenized and bland. Liberalism would for the time have to recognize that the enemy was not “a conspiracy of wealth seeking to grind the faces of the poor, but a conspiracy of blandness . . . not the hard-faced men but the faceless men”; it would in general have to concern itself less with economics and politics and more with “the general style and quality in our civilization.” The nation had, in placing private pleasure ahead of public benefit, lost its sense of national purpose. Adlai Stevenson typified the liberal indictment of the U.S. in the 1950’s as he asked rhetorically, “With the supermarket as our temple and the singing commercial as our litany, are we likely to

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁸ “Liberalism,” *Saturday Review*, 40 (8 June, 1957), 37; “The New Mood in Politics” (1960), *Politics of Hope*, p. 83; “Our New-Found Leisure Won’t Bore Us if Some of It Is Employed in Reading,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 231 (18 April, 1959), 10.

fire the world with an irresistible vision of America's exalted purposes and inspiring way of life?"²⁹

Schlesinger, it should be said, made sporadic efforts to bring all this down to earth, and recover it for the normal world of politics. Usually his complaints included mention of specific areas for legislative attention: education, medical care, defense spending, civil rights, civil liberties, city planning and slum clearance, better housing, aid to the elderly, and improvement in mass culture. Mostly, however, such checklists were merely tacked on without development as an afterthought to the general indictment. In any case, most such issues were not new at all, as implied in the idea of a transformed qualitative liberalism; they were rather unfinished business from the New and Fair Deals. Where the issues were new, as in the concern for the level of quality of mass culture, it was not clear just how much leverage the government had—or should have—for change. In general, however, the specific issues cited simply bore little discernible relation to the general argument.

Perhaps the essential problem in the new liberalism emerged when Schlesinger referred to the popularity of the Reverend Billy Graham as one of the symptoms of national discontent to which liberals should give attention.³⁰ To suppose, even momentarily, that government programs or liberal politics had the answer to the needs revealed in the search for God was surely fundamentally to confuse what politics was all about. Schlesinger in his more reflective moments understood this, understood that the actions of government had only marginal effects on individual human happiness and fulfillment but, too often, in his rhetorical enthusiasm, he elided the distinction between public and private spheres and talked as if public needs (obviously a legitimate concern in their own right) were indistinguishable from private discontents and longings. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's suggestion that people in search of a sense of purpose should consult their archbishops seemed the definitive comment on the whole matter.

Even in more secular terms, the liberal analysis of the 1950's was open to question, minimizing as it did the emergence of millions of Americans out of poverty and the improvement in the lives

²⁹ *Kennedy or Nixon?* p. 39; "Where Does the Liberal Go From Here?" *New York Times Magazine*, 4 August 1957, p. 38; the Stevenson quotation is in William E. Leuchtenburg *et al.*, *The Unfinished Century: America Since 1900* (Boston, 1973), p. 785.

³⁰ "The Future of Liberalism: The Challenge of Abundance," p. 8.

of countless others, while exaggerating out of all proportion the moral and esthetic costs of those improvements. From much of the talk, it might have been supposed that Americans had been better off in the poverty-stricken but presumably virtuous thirties than in the wickedly prosperous fifties.

Yet by the last years of the decade, liberalism as cultural criticism had gathered considerable momentum, and it was aided by an accumulation of worrisome domestic and foreign problems: signs of slowdown in the economy, a sense of loss of initiative to the USSR in the struggle for world leadership following the launching of Sputnik, growing frustration over the continuing impasse in the cold war. Even before the Kennedy campaign of 1960, then, there was a widespread sense that the nation required a new infusion of energy, spirit, and direction.

For Schlesinger, the need for renewed purpose was inextricably involved with the need for dynamic leadership. He had always believed in the "indispensable place of leadership in the democratic process"; he believed, indeed, in the necessary function of the hero to rally weaker men in society's perpetual struggle against determinism and inertia. Thus he drew on the legend of Prometheus, who had first defied the gods and established man's autonomy and independence.

Ever since, man, like Prometheus, has warred against history. It has always been a bitter and remorseless fight; for the heavy weight of human inertia lies with fatalism. It takes a man of exceptional vision and strength and will—it takes, in short, a hero—to try to wrench history from what lesser men consider its pre-conceived path.³¹

Through much of the 1950's Schlesinger, as with most liberal intellectuals, looked to Adlai Stevenson as the leader-hero. By 1960, however, Stevenson had twice lost presidential contests and Schlesinger was increasingly drawn to the candidacy of his home-state senator, John F. Kennedy; in time, he became one of Kennedy's advisers and speechwriters. Kennedy appealed to Schlesinger in his impatience with the "Eisenhower trance" and in his view that everything wrong in recent American political performance "went back to the question of presidential leadership." A Kennedy ad-

³¹ "On Heroic Leadership and the Dilemma of Strong Men and Weak Peoples" (1960), *Politics of Hope*, p. 22; "The Decline of Greatness" (1958), *Politics of Hope*, p. 33.

ministration, Schlesinger argued would dedicate itself to abolishing the “terrifying discrepancy” between national performance and national potential.³²

Schlesinger looked to renewed leadership to bring conflict and movement back into American politics, though the conflict was no longer associated, as in the past, with clear class or economic distinctions, and the sense of movement, liberated from any Niebuhrian inhibitions, was sanctified by its dynamism alone.

. . . the 60's will probably be 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.

When this happens, America will be herself again.³³

America would be herself again. Here Schlesinger specified what normally remained implicit in his political analysis: the doctrine of liberal legitimacy. America in her true identity, her authentic manifestation, had to be liberal, however protean that liberalism might prove over time. The Vital Center might move left or right, might significantly alter its ethos and beliefs, but under all circumstances there was only folly and illusion outside its boundaries.

In 1960 the issue for America was clearly joined, not now between warring classes or interests, but between materialism and idealism, drift and mastery, moral indolence and moral vigor.

The choice we confront . . . is to muddle along as we have done for a decade, watching our power and influence decline in the world and our own country sink into mediocrity and cant and payola and boredom—either this or to recover control over our national destiny and resume the movement to fulfill the real promise of American life, a promise defined not by the glitter of our wealth but by the splendor of our ideals.³⁴

With such elevated hopes, Schlesinger awaited the return from exile of the liberal legitimists, and his own entry into power with them.

Schlesinger's dream was that John Kennedy would “revolu-

³² *Kennedy or Nixon?* pp. 33, 25, 51.

³³ “The New Mood in Politics,” p. 93.

³⁴ *Kennedy or Nixon?* p. 51.

tionize the moral tone of the country [and] inaugurate the new epoch of national progress.”³⁵ We can sense in retrospect that Kennedy’s personal vision of his political possibilities was more restrained—his own often expansive rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding. At any rate, the new president learned quickly the limits on his ability to get the country moving again, and Schlesinger, as special assistant to the president, found himself in the unaccustomed situation of explaining to critics the constraints on presidential leadership at home and the limits of American example abroad. At the same time, however, he continued fervently to believe in and to encourage what he saw as Kennedy’s essential liberal convictions. The death of the president heightened this perception: Schlesinger’s memoir of the Kennedy presidency emphasized JFK as a convinced, if always realistic, liberal.³⁶

Schlesinger saw Kennedy as a liberal much like himself, a man who could be seen “as a conservative, because of his sober sense of the frailty of man, the power of institutions and the frustrations of history, or as a progressive, because of his vigorous confidence in reason, action and the future.”³⁷ Yet one senses throughout *A Thousand Days* that Schlesinger wanted to impute to JFK something more: that streak of the eternal New Dealer that was so essential a part of Schlesinger himself, but not at all—or at least not evidently so—of the president he served. Schlesinger repeatedly found reasons to excuse or mitigate Kennedy’s caution and to suppose that JFK wanted to be more liberal than events presumably would allow. Yet a close reading suggests that Kennedy acted less liberally than Schlesinger sometimes hoped for the simple reason that he was less a liberal than Schlesinger supposed.

Schlesinger rightly emphasized Kennedy’s essentially ironic cast of mind, his emphasis on rationality as a primary virtue, his freedom from traditional stereotypes and disdain for the true believer. What was less clear was that these qualities had the necessary relation to liberalism that Schlesinger seemed to think they had. Traditional liberals had presupposed an equation between liberalism and virtue; by the 1960’s, Schlesinger regularly assumed instead an identity of liberalism with rationality.

Overall, one could trace in Schlesinger’s treatment of the successive modern liberal heroes—Roosevelt to Stevenson to Kennedy

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁶ *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

—the slow evolution in liberal emphasis from content to process, from substance to style. The pronounced contrast Schlesinger drew between the Eisenhower and Kennedy years rested, in the end, less on the kinds of things that were done than on the way things were done. Kennedy's was an administration to be admired because of its wit and grace and flair; thus Schlesinger suggested that Paris' adoring reaction to the visit of Jacqueline Kennedy meant far more "than the instinctive French response to a charming woman. It had the air of a startled rediscovery of America as a new society, young and cosmopolitan and sophisticated, capable of aspiring to the leadership of the civilized peoples." After Kennedy died, Schlesinger summarized JFK's vision of America with a similar emphasis on comparative superiority of style and sensibility: "He saw America, not as an old nation, self-righteous, conservative, satisfied in its grossness and materialism, but as a young nation, questing, self-critical, dissatisfied, caring for greatness as well as for bigness, caring for the qualities of mind, sensibility and spirit which sustain culture, produce art and elevate society."³⁸

The ambiguities of early 1960's liberalism emerge clearly in analysis of the Kennedy administration's policies and of Schlesinger's treatment of those policies. It is significant in the first place that Kennedy paid more attention to problems abroad than at home; the preoccupation with foreign policy of the inaugural address reflected accurately forthcoming administration priorities. There was also more unabashed liberal idealism expressed in relation to foreign affairs than to domestic issues. Kennedy's least restrained oratorical flourishes were reserved for events abroad.

There were, it is true, hints and flashes of the old domestic radicalism. Schlesinger remarked with relish Kennedy's alienation from the business ethos (the president didn't, it seemed, like to have businessmen around socially in the evening) and made all that he could of Kennedy's conflict with the steel companies in 1962 over their proposed price increases: "In winning this victory, Kennedy answered the question with which the business community had confronted every activist Chief Executive since Jackson: 'Who is President anyway?'"³⁹

But such echoes were only that, and Schlesinger had to concede that Kennedy normally went to considerable lengths to impress

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 352; "A Eulogy: John Fitzgerald Kennedy," *Saturday Evening Post*, 236 (14 December, 1963), 32a.

³⁹ *A Thousand Days*, p. 639.

businessmen with his administration's solicitude for their interests. More generally, Kennedy believed that the economic problems of the modern age were essentially technical in nature, not ideological. On the new issues of domestic urgency, Kennedy was always cautious. He believed, for example, in civil rights, but his policies in that area were neither aggressive nor radical.

Schlesinger's own instinct for moderation had always been modified by his sense of the benefits of vigorous political conflict. At moments the old militance still surfaced ("It's a great illusion that national unity and progress in public policy are compatible," he said in 1964) but increasingly during the Kennedy years his mode of political analysis had decidedly antiradical and conservatizing implications. The great American political tradition, he now argued, consisted in the rejection of all ideologies and orthodoxies in favor of radical empiricism. Terms like capitalism or socialism had so lost meaning as to deserve exclusion from intellectual discourse; the real political division in the world lay between dogmatists and pragmatists. Such an emphasis on pluralist analysis and on liberalism's distinctive preference "for fact over logic, for deed over dogma," suggested a prejudice against systematic criticism of fundamental social arrangements, and it certainly worked out that way in practice.⁴⁰ (The moralism of the late 1950's served as surrogate for such criticism.)

As always, Schlesinger wanted it both ways: he wanted, in the end, to be both a hardheaded realist and a committed idealist, to found a politics of passionate purpose on a philosophy of radical skepticism. Here was the hidden contradiction in desire and thought that plagued liberalism from the 1950's onward. Radical empiricism provided no adequate foundation in theory or practice for anything resembling a radical politics, not, at least, under post-war American conditions *as liberals themselves perceived them*; yet most liberals, covering their retreat to the center under rhetorical flourishes and diversionary excursions, were never entirely comfortable with the rather tepid political conclusions to which their analysis seemed to point.

The increasing tension in liberalism between rhetoric and policy appeared most clearly during the Kennedy years in foreign policy.

⁴⁰ Henry Brandon, "Schlesinger at the White House: An Historian's Inside View of Kennedy at Work," *Harper's*, 229 (July, 1964), 57; "Epilogue: The One Against the Many," in Schlesinger and Morton White, eds., *Paths of American Thought* (Boston, 1963), pp. 532-37.

There existed, on the one hand, the continuing dispiriting realities of the cold war. On several occasions, Schlesinger conceded the unlikelihood of true peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union so long as the USSR retained its commitment to its infallible and rigid dogma; there could be at best in the meantime only an "inspected truce."⁴¹ Schlesinger also, now that he was associated with power, recognized as he had not earlier the limits of American leadership and influence.⁴² Yet there remained also those dreams of new departures and fresh initiatives, the genuine hopes for a new era in American foreign relations. For Kennedy and Schlesinger alike, the conflict was resolved partially, again, by emphasis on style and partially by new policy initiatives launched with characteristically exalted rhetoric.

For Schlesinger, if not for Kennedy, there remained strong traces of the liberal idealism of earlier ages of American foreign policy. Schlesinger argued, for example, that a Kennedy speech to the United Nations calling for general and complete disarmament established the president "as a leader of humanity's party of hope"; yet Schlesinger's own analysis revealed that Kennedy viewed universal disarmament with thoroughgoing skepticism and that he only made the speech for propaganda reasons and in order to conciliate Stevenson, his still idealistic UN ambassador.⁴³ The more belligerent aspects of the Kennedy policies—the creation of the Green Berets and the general infatuation with guerilla warfare and counterinsurgency—received only sketchy and faintly apologetic treatment in Schlesinger's recollections.

The Alliance for Progress displayed the Kennedy administration and Schlesinger in their most idealistic, even radical, guises. The language under which the Alliance was inaugurated referred dramatically to a peaceful democratic revolution, to "a vast cooperative effort, unparalleled in magnitude and nobility of purpose" which would "transform the American continent into a vast crucible of revolutionary ideas and efforts."⁴⁴ The reality bore little relation to the rhetoric: the United States lacked the leverage and most Latin American nations lacked the traditions or resources

⁴¹ "The Cold War and the West: A Symposium," *Partisan Review*, 29 (1962), 81.

⁴² See, for example, the discussion in "America and the World Revolution," *Commentary*, 36 (October, 1963), 278-96.

⁴³ *A Thousand Days*, pp. 478-86.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-05, 761-65.

to produce anything like what Kennedy's words suggested. The future of Latin America turned out to be entirely different from what the originators of the Alliance had in mind. Perhaps the Alliance's purposes were not entirely focused abroad: it seemed to represent for Schlesinger a way of painlessly instilling in the New Frontier a measure of the New Deal's radical hopes. If the democratic radicalism of the Vital Center could no longer be sustained at home, it might at least be polished up for export and thus kept partially alive as an inspiration to the American left.

It was not, however, in democratic radicalism that Schlesinger located Kennedy's greatest contribution to American foreign policy. That could be found rather in the president's liberation of the American world view from fanaticism, dogmatism, and moralistic rigidity. Kennedy, in Schlesinger's view, held up as the ideal of American policy a "world of diversity."⁴⁵ As usual, Schlesinger highlighted the Kennedy achievement by contrast with what had gone before.

The John Foster Dulles contrast between the god-anointed apostles of free enterprise and the regimented hordes of atheistic communism bored [Kennedy]. Seeing the world as an historian rather than as a moralist, he could not utter without embarrassment the self-serving platitudes about the total virtue of one side and the total evil of the other.⁴⁶

Kennedy's view of the world was essentially pluralistic. The United States would have to learn to live in a divided international system with a polycentric Communism and an equally diverse non-Communist bloc, a system in which there could not be "an American solution to every world problem."⁴⁷ In such a world, myth, stereotype, and orthodoxy were the mortal sins, and reason the only sure guide to survival.

As in domestic affairs, the pluralist analysis of foreign policy, while a reasonable accommodation with reality, did not offer that additional liberating glow of idealism that Schlesinger wanted from it for his liberal purposes. The world of diversity was not really an ideal at all; it was simply, given the alternative of world nuclear

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 609-19; "The Historian and History," *Foreign Affairs*, 41 (April, 1963), 496-97.

⁴⁶ *A Thousand Days*, p. 298.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 615. Schlesinger was to return to this Kennedy phrase over and over again in the years that followed.

destruction, a reality to which all sane men, John Foster Dulles included, knew they would have to adjust themselves. Kennedy doubtless made that adjustment with better grace than Dulles had, constructing as he did so an optimistic faith that the world was moving from the monolithic to the pluralistic, where men and nations would be free to work out in peace their separate and hopefully progressive destinies. But that was a fragile virtue to make of such a bleak necessity. Peaceful coexistence was perhaps the best that could be hoped for in a dangerous and intractable world, but it was hardly the bright ideal to enthuse free men that Schlesinger tried to make of it. The vision of a world of diversity offered no adequate foundation for that fighting faith that Schlesinger and his fellow Kennedy liberals still dreamed of sustaining; few people could be expected to commit their faith, much less risk their lives, in the name of pluralistic accommodation.

By the end of the Kennedy years, then, liberalism faced an increasing gap between its characteristic way of talking about politics and its actual perceptions and prescriptions. In both domestic and foreign affairs, liberals seemed to be promising more than they were able or even intended to deliver. The events of the 1960's exposed the gap between rhetoric and policy, and forced liberals, however painfully, to confront their philosophical and political evasions.

Since the collapse of Henry Wallace's Progressive party movement in 1948, American liberals had faced no significant challenge from anywhere but the right, and even that conflict had become over time considerably restricted and confined. The events of the 1960's, however, had such disorienting effects as to confront mainstream liberalism with not so much a two-front as an all-front ideological war. Liberals expended considerable intellectual energy simply determining the major enemy of the day; American political culture, particularly on the left, came to resemble a Hobbesian war of all against all.

For the first time in two decades, the proper location of the Vital Center became a matter for serious debate. Schlesinger and other liberals searched from the mid-sixties on for a place to stand that was defensible and which clearly distinguish itself from that of adversaries of left and right. Unlike the situation in the 1940's, however, the 1960's liberals had no New Deal, no Stalin, no Niebuhr to offer them points of reference from which they might

position themselves, and they could agree on no other set of orienting forces or symbols. Increasingly uncertain as to how liberalism properly translated into issues—uncertain, indeed, of the nature of their constituency—many liberals tended to cover their confusion with an intense if generally unfocused moralism. (Moralism is here defined as the tendency to reduce political issues to moral terms and to arrange and comprehend those terms in such polarized fashion as to preclude complexity of analysis.) Schlesinger himself tried to avoid moralistic stances, but even his disciplined efforts to maintain a New Politics free from sentimentality, arrogance, and self-hatred were not entirely successful. His own continuing resources for maintaining political balance and vitality—emphasis on rationality, rejection of ideology, faith in the benefits of conflict and change, dependence on strong leadership and promethean will—could offer neither direction specific enough nor inspiration deep enough to provide the left a way out of its confusions.

The single most important source of all this was, of course, Vietnam. As a member of the Kennedy administration, Schlesinger was at least indirectly associated with the first major steps in direct American involvement in the war. His early ambiguity in viewing the conflict reflected his personal situation and loyalties. In *A Thousand Days* he was extremely critical of the original American commitment made by Eisenhower and Dulles in 1954, but he wrote as if that quite mild commitment had been absolutely binding on Kennedy, leaving him only the most marginal freedom of action: a commitment, however foolish, had been made; and dominoes, however avoidably, had been set on end.⁴⁸ Throughout Schlesinger's writings on the war, Kennedy appeared as an essentially passive victim of circumstances, not as the positive actor who, whatever his misgivings, significantly increased the level of American participation.

After Kennedy died, Schlesinger became increasingly critical of the war effort. For several years, however, he remained restrained in his criticism, and he was never, as views toward Vietnam went, really a militant. Vietnam was doubtless a "ghastly folly," but it remained a "tragedy without villains," a product of the "politics of inadvertence." As late as December 1967, Schlesinger wrote in decidedly moderate terms of the qualities necessary for prudent political judgment on the war: "a recognition of the complexity of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 536-38.

human motives and of the intractability of many external situations; a mistrust of absolute judgment; a revulsion from sob-sisterism; a contempt for hysteria; a readiness to distinguish between moral anguish and political process." He insisted above all that the debate be conducted in a rational tone of mutual trust in order that, whatever the outcome of the war, national unity might be preserved.⁴⁹ For Schlesinger, the war could be understood—and condemned—purely in traditional terms of the national interest.⁵⁰

Schlesinger's desire that the Vietnam debate avoid moral and ideological categories reflected his concern over an emerging New Left analysis that extended its criticism of the war to a wholesale denunciation of America's role in the cold war and, indeed, of the entire American political economy. As that analysis developed its historical case, liberal "cold warriors" like Schlesinger were singled out for particular condemnation. Schlesinger fought back vigorously, and in a series of clashes with figures like Noam Chomsky, Herbert Marcuse, and William Appleman Williams undertook to defend liberal anti-Communism and to expose the shortcomings of the New Left critics.⁵¹ Vietnam itself remained for Schlesinger essentially an avoidable quagmire produced by specific errors in judgment, not the inescapable product of a benighted system or the demonic creation of evil men.

Schlesinger's differences with the New Left over Vietnam led

⁴⁹ Schlesinger's attitudes toward the war in 1966-67 can be seen in the following: "Vietnam: What Should We Do Now?" *Look*, 30 (9 August, 1966); "Speaking Out," *Saturday Evening Post*, 239 (13 August, 1966); "On the Inscrutability of History," *Encounter*, 27 (November, 1966); *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy* (1967; Greenwich, Conn., 1968), "Liberal Anti-Communism Revisited," *Commentary*, 44 (September, 1967); "Two Questions About Viet Nam," *Encounter*, 29 (December, 1967).

⁵⁰ "The Necessary Amorality of Foreign Affairs," *Harper's*, 243 (August, 1971).

⁵¹ For Schlesinger's anti-revisionist analysis of the beginning of the cold war, see "The Origins of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, 46 (October, 1967). His attacks on Chomsky and Marcuse can be found in *Violence: America in the Sixties* (New York, 1968), p. 69 ff.; "The Intellectual and American Society," *The Crisis of Confidence: Ideas, Power and Violence in America* (Boston, 1969), p. 66 ff.; and in a series of exchanges with Chomsky in *Commentary* (December, 1969; June, 1970). His perceptive and very telling critique of Williams is in "America II," *Partisan Review*, 37 (November, 1970).

It is interesting that Schlesinger was far more sympathetic to New Leftists' treatment of the Jacksonian era. He thought their analysis supported some of his arguments in *Age of Jackson*, a book written during Schlesinger's own more radical early years. John A. Garraty, *Interpreting American History: Conversations with Historians* (New York, 1970), p. 276.

him to suppose that the distinction between New Politics and New Left was more absolute than it was. He underestimated the degree to which a common radical sensibility had come to pervade the American left by the late 1960's.⁵² If liberals generally ignored the Marxist inclinations of those farther left, they broadly shared the radical mood of moral outrage—and compounded it with heavy doses of guilt. Schlesinger himself, more sensitive to ideological nuances and less given to apocalyptic moods than most liberals, sometimes drifted into the radical or neo-radical idiom.

The most notable occasion was his pronouncement of 1968 that Americans were “the most frightening people on this planet.” The context is important: Schlesinger was delivering a commencement address the day after Robert Kennedy had been shot in Los Angeles. As one close to both of the slain Kennedy brothers, Schlesinger was understandably grief-stricken and distraught. Yet it remains significant that his grief found outlet in an analysis of American violence which took the form of a highly emotive indictment of the general state of the nation. Nor was Schlesinger's outburst only a momentary emotional reaction: he later published the address, in various forms, in several books and magazine articles.⁵³

The fullest published version began with a quotation from William Styron's *Set This House on Fire* to the effect that what America needed was something terrible to happen to it, “so that when the people have been through hellfire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they'll be men again, human beings, not a bunch of smug contented cows rooting at the trough.” From such a perspective Schlesinger developed his “most frightening” theme: “We are above all a frightening people 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.” He then proceeded to an overview of the nation's past and present, the general tone of which is suggested in such observations as “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” and “the zeal with

⁵² See Irwin Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959-1972* (New York, 1974), especially chaps. 5 and 7.

⁵³ “America 1968: The Politics of Violence,” *Harper's*, 237 (August, 1968); “The Dark Heart of American History,” *Saturday Review*, 51 (19 October, 1968); *Violence: America in the Sixties*; “Violence as an American Way of Life,” *Crisis of Confidence*.

which we have pursued an irrational war . . . suggests internal impulses of hatred and violence demanding outlet and shaping our foreign policy to their ends."⁵⁴

Schlesinger's analysis was not only febrile in tone, it was also selective in its eloquent pleas against violence. By establishing a clear distinction between individual and collective actions, Schlesinger was able to pass over or equivocate on the question of black riots and to excuse and even defend student uprisings. Campus violence was the unavoidable result of unresponsive university administrators and, in any case, besieged institutions like Berkeley and Columbia would be "wiser and better universities as a result of the student revolts."⁵⁵

Schlesinger, like so many on the left in the 1960's, found it almost impossible to criticize college youth, with the exception of his condemnation of the revolutionaries in Students for a Democratic Society. Normally he wrote about young people with that particular solicitude and indulgence common to contemporary liberals and radicals alike. Both the New Left and the New Politics found their policies and general perspectives pervasively marked by the yearnings and aspirations of the young. Schlesinger had largely avoided the earlier temptation of the left to romanticize the working class, but he proved more susceptible to its latter-day tendency to the apotheosis of the student generation.

The glorification of the young and the accompanying disregard for the white working class was perhaps the single most striking sign of the drift of liberalism away from the majority feelings and concerns of the American people. There were other instances as well. Schlesinger was typical, for example, in being able to imagine the concern of Richard Nixon and other conservatives for law and order only in terms suggestive of demagoguery and repression; similarly, an analysis of the appeal of Spiro Agnew showed little understanding of the genuine public concerns the vice-president managed so adroitly to exploit, dwelling instead on signs of public paranoia and making ominous references to T. W. Adorno's theories of "authoritarian submissiveness."⁵⁶

By the end of the 1960's, the state of American politics was so unsettled as to prompt Schlesinger to a broad reassessment of the

⁵⁴ *Violence: America in the Sixties*, pp. v, 25, 31, 29.

⁵⁵ "Joe College, R.I.P.," *Crisis of Confidence*.

⁵⁶ "Violence as an American Way of Life," p. 16; "The Amazing Success Story of 'Spiro Who?'," *New York Times Magazine*, 26 July, 1970, p. 55.

liberal condition. The great modern fact of the "velocity of history" marked his point of departure: "Science and technology make, dissolve, rebuild and enlarge our environment every week; and the world alters more in a decade than it used to alter in centuries." In tones reminiscent of *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger suggested that this accelerating process of change was out of control, leaving American society in a demoralized state of "incipient fragmentation." The situation was made the more uncertain by the decay of traditional social institutions—political machines, labor unions, farm groups, ethnic federations. The weakening of these groups meant the withering of their functions of political brokerage between the voter and government, and this left the isolated citizen experiencing more sense of "individual helplessness" than ever before.⁵⁷

As traditional groups had decayed since the New Deal, so had issues changed. The movement from quantitative to qualitative liberalism had rearranged the fault lines of American politics. The crucial dividing line of partisan alignment was no longer income but education. On the newly dominant moral and cultural issues, Schlesinger argued, "it is the less educated, low-income whites who tend to be the most emotional and primitive champions of conservatism—who want to crack down on the 'niggers,' imprison the long-haired college kids and bomb hell out of the North Vietnamese. The affluent and better-educated, on the other hand, tend to care more about rationality, reform and progress."⁵⁸

The Democratic party had before it, in the 1968 candidacies of Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, and Robert Kennedy, three approaches from which to choose to meet the current situation. For Schlesinger, Humphrey's old politics of alliances with obsolescent broker institutions revealed a connection with only the outer shell of the New Deal, not its real "mind and . . . soul," while Eugene McCarthy's apparent disdain for the working class and too-heavy reliance on the highly educated threatened to turn the Democratic party into a "semiprecious rally of the *illuminati*." This left the path that Robert Kennedy had charted before his death, an attempt to revive in the current context the Roosevelt coalition "of the educated few and the uneducated many." The solution was to learn again from FDR the great lesson of American liberalism: the

⁵⁷ "The Velocity of History," *Newsweek*, 6 July, 1970, pp. 32-33, 34; "The Prospects for Politics," *Crisis of Confidence*, p. 188.

⁵⁸ "The Prospects for Politics," p. 189.

need for a dynamic leadership that would bridge the gaps and resolve the contradictions in policy preferences in the liberal coalition.

Roosevelt had persuaded the working class of the thirties to go along with him on issues outside their daily concern, like foreign policy, civil liberties and equal rights, not because the "less educated" then had more enlightened views on such issues than their counterparts have today, but because they had a confidence in Roosevelt founded in his leadership on the issues that *were* part of their daily concern and because, for these and other reasons, they trusted and loved him. I think that Kennedy supposed that today's white low-income groups were similarly composed of decent, if confused, people and that they could be similarly reclaimed for political rationality.⁵⁹

Schlesinger's attempt to resolve the two constituencies problem of modern liberalism was more ingenious than persuasive. The issues of most pressing "daily concern" to the working class in the 1960's were in many cases precisely those on which, from Schlesinger's perspective, they were least susceptible to being "reclaimed for political rationality." Nothing concerned the average urban worker more than his fear for his family's safety on city streets or his apprehensions over the effects of racial and class imbalance on his children's education. Schlesinger's argument not only reduced working-class positions to crude caricature ("crack down on the 'niggers'"), it also simply assumed that on the new social issues the views of the "better-educated" liberals were alone rational and "enlightened." Yet it seemed questionable that working-class anger over campus violence, street crime, and anti-American demonstrations by war protestors could be dismissed as evidence of bigoted reaction. In any case, Robert Kennedy had bridged the educational gulf in liberalism not so much through skillful balancing of policies as through being who he was: the Kennedy mystique, heightened by assassination, was the true key to his success. It would seem unlikely that such an essentially charismatic, even morbid, appeal would recommend itself to one who, like Schlesinger, had for so long insisted on rationality as a primary democratic virtue.

The problems for leadership in a divided liberalism became evident in the 1972 presidential campaign. From very early on,

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 217, 213, 218.

Schlesinger's candidate was George McGovern, the heir of the 1968 New Politics. Schlesinger's endorsement suggested the laying on of hands in the succession to the line of liberal legitimacy: "I know the esteem and affection in which both John and Robert Kennedy—Adlai Stevenson as well—held him."⁶⁰

McGovern represented a possibility for a genuine new departure in American liberalism: a movement beyond equality of opportunities toward equality of condition. The risks in such a step would have been great, but the left would at least have found a policy around which to revive that dynamic faith that liberals like Schlesinger still required of their politics. Such a commitment would also have represented a logical extension into prosperity of the New Deal impulse. Yet Schlesinger chose to emphasize in his campaign arguments the least economically radical aspects of the McGovern program. Although he made fleeting, generalized reference to the candidate's plans for income redistribution, Schlesinger concentrated on nonideological and personal matters. He depicted a McGovern who was not really all that radical and whose most important qualities were openness, honesty, and decency. Issues of substance were generally reduced to the simple question of change: "in a broad sense the election of 1972 will be the politics of authority and the Establishment versus the politics of change. The contrast obliterates older contrasts between liberals and conservatives."⁶¹

From the beginning, the McGovern campaign had been torn between its populist and "radical chic" impulses; given the nature of the candidate's constituency, it was perhaps inevitable that it finally emphasize the latter. The McGovern candidacy embodied in large part the essentially moralistic critique of American society offered by that segment of the upper-middle class that fancied itself a "constituency of conscience." That Schlesinger should have found himself in such company was highly ironic. He who had taught the left its Niebuhrian lessons, who had so assiduously instructed liberals over the years in the evils of sentimentality and self-righteousness, found himself involved in the most revivalistic campaign of any major candidate in recent history. Those political delusions of liberal Christianity against which Reinhold Niebuhr

⁶⁰ "The Case for George McGovern," *New Republic*, 166 (26 February, 1972), 17.

⁶¹ "How McGovern Will Win," *New York Times Magazine*, 30 July, 1972, p. 34.

had fought throughout his life found almost quintessential expression in McGovern, who specifically traced his personal political philosophy to the imperatives of the social gospel.⁶² It appeared that Schlesinger had sacrificed his Niebuhrian realism to his progressive hopes; his so doing demonstrated how far liberalism had drifted from its moorings in the Vital Center.

The gift which Richard Nixon made to the liberals of Watergate helped immensely to assuage the humiliation and ideological confusion that followed McGovern's defeat. Schlesinger's sense of vindication over Watergate might have been expected to be qualified since, coming just after other perceived executive excesses in Vietnam, the scandal raised widespread doubts concerning presidential power, a central tenet of Schlesinger's liberal faith. Schlesinger, however, was in no way chagrined over the new distrust of executive leadership; he instead translated it into a timely and highly successful book.⁶³

The argument of *The Imperial Presidency* is difficult to summarize since, with the exception of its judgment on Nixon, it was so deeply ambivalent. The foreword suggested that the author would concentrate on the constitutional, as opposed to political, aspects of the gradual shift in power, in foreign policy especially, from Congress to the President, yet almost 300 pages later the reader learned that the important arguments on the question were about politics and not about the Constitution; it turned out in any case that the problem was not so much executive-legislative relations as such as policy, though the policy problem was subsequently defined only in the most nebulous way. ("It would be excessively gloomy . . . to suppose that a moderate balance-of-power foreign policy was irreconcilable with the separation of powers. An immoderate balance-of-power foreign policy, however, involving the United States in useless wars and grandiose dreams, was another matter.") Other difficulties abounded: Nixon's presidency was viewed alternatively as a revolutionary departure from past practice and as only a culmination of a long development; at another point, Schlesinger, after arguing that modern presidents needed more power to manage economic affairs, took Nixon severely to task for his attempts at just such economic management (a highly sophisticated student of American politics, Schlesinger unblinkingly ex-

⁶² George McGovern, "I Have Earned the Nomination," interview in *Life*, 73 (7 July, 1972), 36.

⁶³ *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston, 1973).

pressed concern that Nixon had "used economic powers for political ends").⁶⁴ Throughout the book, Schlesinger vitiated plausible arguments by his unrelenting antipathy toward Nixon. His general conclusions concerning the need for comity in presidential-congressional relations and for a vigilant public as the only effective check on a runaway president were entirely unexceptionable, but they came neither with particular force nor as significant revelation. Following *The Imperial Presidency*, Schlesinger continued in his efforts to urge impeachment proceedings.⁶⁵

The Watergate scandal and the Nixon resignation marked the belated and tragic end of the politics of the 1960's. The preoccupation with economic issues which followed came as a relief to most liberals, but the disappearance from pressing memory of the divisions of the late 1960's could not keep submerged forever the unresolved and fundamental conflicts within liberalism over constituency, philosophy, and program. For that reason, Schlesinger's prediction for American politics of an indeterminate period of "permanent instability" applied with perhaps particular force to the liberal community.⁶⁶

It would be inappropriate to suggest that liberalism directly caused the crisis of contemporary American society. Vietnam, political assassinations, racial conflict, urban decay—it is to these things that we must look for reasons for our difficulties. Yet the impact of events on societies is never unmediated: events affect nations in varying ways depending, among other things, on the political philosophies and values which characterize particular societies. Ideas do have consequences. It made a difference that America was dominated by a liberalism which reacted with such a volatile combination of confusion, guilt, and moralism to the events of the 1960's. Any society would have been shaken by such a succession of blows, but not all of them would have been shaken in the same way. The crises of those years exposed certain weaknesses of American liberalism, and those weaknesses acted in turn to heighten the effects of the crises.

This is not to say that all liberals lost their bearings, or that those that did did so on all occasions. Schlesinger, as a case in

⁶⁴ *Imperial Presidency*, pp. viii, 287, 207, 255, 417, 402, 234.

⁶⁵ "What If We *Don't* Impeach Him?" *Harper's*, 248 (May, 1974).

⁶⁶ "Politics, 1971," *Vogue*, 157 (1 February, 1971), 139. For elaboration on this point, see James A. Nuechterlein, "The People vs. the Interests," *Commentary*, 59 (March, 1975).

point, usually remained unhysterical and averse to categories of sin and guilt. His historical temper normally deterred him from sweeping sociological or moral judgments. Moreover, when Schlesinger did on occasion lapse into moralism, he was not necessarily fulfilling the inherent logic of his liberal faith but was rather acting against his own soundest instincts. Schlesinger's usual insistence on empiricism, pragmatism, and incrementalism represented American liberalism's best (and most conservative) historical traditions.

Yet in the late 1960's and early 1970's, many liberals deserted their customary pragmatism and moderation for a moralistic, radical, and even apocalyptic style of politics, and even so normally sensible a thinker as Schlesinger could not entirely escape the mood. We can see how it was that liberals made the worst of a bad situation by noting, through Schlesinger, certain traditional and contemporary tensions in liberal thought.

Schlesinger's thought has always reflected an internal conflict between his conservative insights and his liberal instincts. The conservative insights can be traced to the historical temper, to the Niebuhrian view of man, and to American liberalism's pragmatic tendencies to political prudence. The liberal instincts stem from Schlesinger's share of what Louis Hartz has called America's "submerged and absolute liberal faith," from his also distinctively American belief in activism, and, perhaps most crucially, from his formative political experience of the New Deal.

The New Deal was a period of crisis and of heroic response to crisis. The consecutive cataclysms of the great depression and the Second World War left as their legacy the sense that the normal condition of politics is one of continuing crisis management, of permanent moral mobilization. Long before the occurrences of the 1960's, Schlesinger and other liberals revealed in the vehemence and the particular nature of their criticism of Eisenhower's America the view that a natural and proper politics always approximates an ongoing crusade.

But the New Deal mood did not transfer well to the postwar world. Schlesinger's activist politics had originally been kept specific and rooted in social reality by his supple version of class and group conflict. Prosperity eroded the basis of that political perspective, as Schlesinger himself came to recognize. Yet even if the politics of the New Deal became obsolete, for Schlesinger its spirit had still to be sustained. Even without crisis conditions such as depression

or war, America nonetheless required that "sense of glowing national purpose" without which politics lost its claim to commitment.⁶⁷

Yet without a grounding in firm socioeconomic conditions (and with the gradual lessening of U.S.-Soviet tensions eliminating the cold war as surrogate commitment), the politics of national purpose became increasingly insubstantial, appealing earnestly but vaguely to the need for leadership, purpose, movement, and will. This combination of deep commitment and uncertain direction, of intense feeling and nonspecific analysis, led almost inevitably under postwar conditions to a politics that consisted of an unrelenting esthetic and moral criticism of middle-class society. The style of politics contained in Schlesinger's qualitative liberalism of the 1950's led naturally to the extraordinary expectations of the early 1960's and the apocalyptic disappointments which followed. When New Left and New Politics spokesmen insisted that war and racism were only the most visible manifestations of a deeper moral ugliness underlying American society, they were speaking the authentic language, heightened by conditions, of the liberal analysis of the previous fifteen years. Schlesinger himself usually avoided the more extreme extensions of that analysis, but the nature of his appeals of the 1950's had anticipated the shift both of liberal constituency and of liberal policy emphasis. If politics had to have a dynamic to give it urgency, and if class and economic issues were no longer readily available, then moralism became virtually unavoidable.

Perhaps because of uneasiness over the increasingly moralistic mood of the left, Schlesinger came by the late 1960's to emphasize as the source of contemporary discontent the impersonal factor of the velocity of history. The crisis of American society seemed so severe, he argued, because the United States, as the most scientifically and technologically advanced of nations, suffered with particular intensity "the crises of modernity."⁶⁸ For Schlesinger, as for most Americans, change had always been something to be awaited eagerly and optimistically; the bedrock affirmation of American liberalism was simple, pervasive, and almost entirely unconscious: change is good. It was in that fundamental American faith that Schlesinger had not merely accepted change as the inevitable law of life and history, but had rushed out to

⁶⁷ *Kennedy or Nixon?* p. 49.

⁶⁸ "The Velocity of History," p. 33,

embrace it, justifying his encouragement of social conflict on the basis of conflict's fructifying impetus to change. In that same spirit he could describe America as only truly itself when it was seized by a mood "spirited, articulate, inventive, incoherent, turbulent, with energy shooting off wildly in all directions."

Yet how was such a faith to be sustained in light of his own description of the demoralization and collapse of values accompanying the accelerated rate of change? Schlesinger's answer to the dilemma was dependence on the Promethean force of the great leader and, in the end, a continuing hope in hope itself, an affirmation that the existing confusion was less "the proof of decay than the price of progress" and that what seemed hopeless turmoil might "well be the birth pangs of a new epoch in the history of man."⁶⁹ It surely required an act of faith to imagine a heroic leadership solving the problem of too-rapid change by means of "a bold instinct for innovation"; this seemed an essentially homeopathic nostrum, finding the cure for the problem of the velocity of history in an equivalent velocity of social reform, political adaptation, and adjustment of values. Such a vertiginous prospect seemed all the more dubious in light of Schlesinger's own continuing, contrapuntal themes of the indelibly flawed nature of man, the inherent intractability of institutions, and the consequent limits of politics.

Schlesinger was no Pollyanna, and he never supposed that progress would be inevitable or automatic. But he was, finally, more a whig-progressive than he had ever thought. One of his favorite quotations was from Emerson: "If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope?"⁷⁰ Here was the authentic voice of American liberalism: the perception of revolution less as a thing of terror than of hope. (The relative—and highly exceptional—mildness of the American revolution had always deluded the American left on this score.) It was just this buoyant optimism that led James Truslow Adams, on rereading Emerson and reconsidering his relation to American thought, to conclude that "America is a child who has never gazed on the face of death."⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁰ "The Intellectual and American Society," p. 52.

⁷¹ James Truslow Adams, "Emerson Reread," in George F. Whicher, ed., *The Transcendentalist Revolt Against Materialism* (Boston, 1949), p. 38.

Schlesinger was in no sense an intellectual child, but he did analyze his own country in the spirit of what the Marxists used derisively to term "American exceptionalism." He repeated frequently his essential view of the tragedy of history, and yet he wrote more often than not on American history and politics as if America was, or at least should be, a success story. Schlesinger imagined something tangible and special in what he so often referred to as the promise of American life. America could still be the "last, best hope of freedom" and there remained something distinctive about "the splendor of our ideals."⁷²

It was this residue of progressive idealism that led Schlesinger occasionally to overestimate the uses of rhetoric. In his own writings, the language sometimes slipped into a kind of rhetorical overdrive, in which the perorations took on virtually a life of their own, free from the restrictions implicit in the preceding analysis. He similarly tended to overvalue emotive language in the political world, to assign to it an almost autonomous power to overmaster reality. Noting the recurring criticism of the Kennedy administration's habit of overselling its programs, Schlesinger characteristically replied: "It is hard to suppose that any large undertakings will ever get started without expansive benedictions of hope. Or at least so Americans have always thought. 'Nothing great was ever achieved,' as Emerson said, 'without enthusiasm.'"⁷³ Schlesinger himself had composed the best response to this argument more than fifteen years earlier: "yet American liberalism feels that realism is the source of strength, and that illusion, while productive of momentary enthusiasm, will be in the end a source of catastrophe."⁷⁴ Rhetorical excesses were most destructive in their negative formulations, when progressive hopes frustrated could lead to moralistic indictments and then to a guilt and self-hatred that meant the crippling rather than the mobilization of political resources. Language that a Schlesinger might mean metaphorically or ritu-

⁷² *Kennedy or Nixon?* p. 51.

⁷³ "J.F.K.: Promise and Reality," *Commonweal*, 98 (25 May, 1973), 291. This is a review essay of Henry Fairlie's *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (New York, 1973). I have found Fairlie's thoughtful, insightful, and provocative book useful for my own reflections on recent American liberalism, though I think he weakens his case with respect to John F. Kennedy by sometimes considerable overstatement.

⁷⁴ "Liberalism in America: A Note for Europeans," p. 70. I would like to thank my colleagues, Professors Paul Christianson, Klaus Hansen, and Alan Jeeves for their helpful suggestions in the preparation of this article.

alistically could, when taken literally—as it so often was by the young militants of the 1960's—have defeatist and demoralizing consequences.

This was the most ironic consequence of progressive optimism: that it so often led, in modern times, to its precise opposite. The dreams of a glowing national purpose bred a disappointment—often astonishingly bitter—with the many, if less exalted, ways in which America *was* a success story. Nothing of mundane national reality was ever sufficiently satisfying—not material success, not political democracy, not a spacious, if uneven, field of opportunity. Such commonplace achievements had to pale into insignificance for those preoccupied with “spiritual unemployment” or with the restoration of “fighting faiths.” The promise of American life was real enough, but that promise, like that of any nation, was not unlimited, was not addressed to all situations, and could only be imperfectly fulfilled. The Schlesinger who admired Reinhold Niebuhr knew this, but the Schlesinger who followed George McGovern too often forgot it. Like most liberals, he found it difficult genuinely to come to grips with limitation, to concede fully that America was a nation like other nations, with neither special covenants nor a peculiar moral destiny. If liberalism hoped once again to confront seriously the real problems and possibilities of American life, it would have to learn to distinguish more clearly than it recently had between those categories of problems with which politics could effectively deal and those it could not, and in addressing the accessible problems, it would have to cease using a rhetoric of exalted purpose that no longer expressed its real expectations or intentions.

New Leftists have in recent years accused Arthur Schlesinger and his generation of liberals of a failure of nerve. They have a point, but it seems they have got it largely backwards. The liberals' culpability lay not in their original acceptance of Niebuhrian perspectives, as the radicals suppose, but in their failure fully to face the implications of those perspectives for their political predilections. Schlesinger's outlook was always fatally double-minded: he adopted Niebuhrian realism without, in the end, being willing to discard the whig-progressivism with which that realism was logically and politically incompatible. The result, for Schlesinger and for liberals in general, was not the viable pragmatism they imagined but rather a debilitating confusion in thought. America, the quintessential liberal society, continues to pay the price of that confusion.