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The Public Responsibility of The Historian

JAMES F. HOOD

Lindenwood College Faculty Lecture

The Public Responsibility of The Historian

James F. Hood

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faculty lectures given
at Lindenwood College,
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> Before every attempt to describe the world and life and time there stands an unspoken prologue: human history itself. Without that prologue, the rest of the play would be unintelligible buzz and blur.
>
> —Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life*

There have been many definitions of history through the years. Some of them are serious attempts by professional historians to explain their craft to themselves and their public. Others have been quasi-bitter, semi-serious complaints by those who have suffered through the toils of history at school. William James once remarked that "history is the effort to make the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee seem all important." I want to offer yet another definition, one that supports my theme, the responsibility of the historian to the public that he serves. The historian creates reality, nothing less. The historian, by practicing his craft, creates the only effective reality anyone knows.

Carl Becker pointed out some years ago[1] that the past had, in fact, existed, that our accounts of it exist, that the past and the accounts of it are necessarily not the same, but that historians strive to have the two approach each other. To the extent that they do, the historian has succeeded. He has given an approximation of reality. It is not only effective, it is the only way in which reality can be useful. The evidence of the past must be sifted through the mind of the historian, arranged by him in meaningful patterns, purged of its extraneous elements, and then presented by him to the public. It is his pattern, together with his judgments, his opinions about motivations, that make sense of the past. No one can have any significant knowledge of the past by any other means. One's personal experiences are invariably limited in time and space. Our acquaintance with the past must necessarily be vicarious. It must come from the historians who create, then, the only effective reality anyone knows. The ability of the historian to create a vision of reality is limited in effectiveness by some

practical considerations, of course. He cannot depart from the evidence too far. If, for example, an historian of present-day France produced a vision of the French past which convinced the French people that they could aspire to the position in world affairs that France held under Louis XIV, this vision would not give to France the practical possibilities to support it. But it might very well convince the French people to believe in such a role and to act accordingly. The consequences are obvious. The historian's vision of reality must flow from his evidence. As Cleveland Amory put it in his succinct fashion, "You can't make the Duchess of Windsor into Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm."

We must admit, at the outset, that historians are all those who interpret the past. This is a far wider list than the professional academic members of the guild. It includes newspaper columnists, TV commentators, some statesmen and politicians. On a small scale, it includes everyone. We all make judgments about segments of the past, particularly those parts that include our own lives. We regulate our daily lives according to those judgments. But the historians with the widest influence are the academic historians in our colleges and universities. If our views of reality are inexorably shaped by historians, then we must ask an important and obvious question: does it matter what they say and write? It does, and for a very human reason.

Man is an unfinished being. He is always in a state of becoming. Arnold Toynbee said a few years ago on this campus: "Civilization is a movement, and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor." This is a distinguishing characteristic of man, that he is unwilling or unable to remain static. By conscious and unconscious cultural effort he remakes and reshapes his life, driven by some kind of inner compulsion to go on. Perhaps Lewis Mumford put it best:

> Instead of taking life as it comes and quietly adapting himself to external conditions, man is constantly evaluating, discriminating, choosing, reforming and transforming at every moment of his existence; and this has been true throughout his history. By conscious selection, man increasingly imposes his own will on nature and not least on that ultimate product of nature, his own self.[2]

This is both man's deepest curse and greatest boon. He never rests content and is always a driven being. On the other hand, his horizons are never closed; his hopes need never be circumscribed. Yet he dare not lose touch with the ongoing process. Because man needs to rationalize and justify his present and extrapolate his future from his past experiences, both personal and vicarious, he must have some systematic knowledge and interpretation of the past. Without some precise feeling for his position on the growing edge of culture, he is, quite literally, lost; his contact with effective reality is broken.

Man is both contemplative and active. He must always think about himself and his relationship with the culture in which he lives. He plays both these roles, the reflective and the active, but the roles themselves interact. The reflection tempers his activity; his activity illuminates his reflection. The two constantly modify each other. Man's thought about his ongoing culture changes the culture. The culture, in turn, changes his thought about it, all in a never-ending cycle. If history is one of the principal ways in which man reflects about himself, if it provides man with his views about himself and his culture, it is obviously important. It may be all-important.

History, of course, is not the only organized way in which man reflects upon his culture. Literature, political science, music, art, and a thousand other ways have been invented. But history has a unique contribution to make

in this continuing self-examination. It is the peculiar function of history to see man in all his dimensions, including time, simultaneously. History is dynamic; it sees man in his active, never-ending interaction with his total environment. Other disciplines must abstract from the totality of man's life those particular parts that concern them. All of man is history's concern.

Man always tries to reduce his life to patterns; he cannot live without them. They form the essential prerequisite for peace of mind, for a sense of relationship between himself and all his fellows and all the world in which he finds himself. Everyone makes these patterns in some fashion some of the time. It is the full-time responsibility of the historian to make meaningful, helpful patterns. The patterns give the human experience direction and purpose. From these patterns mankind lives in the present and plans for the future. Let's look at some of these patterns and the effect they have upon us.

Of all the patterns that historians create, none is more pervasive than that vision of reality that binds men together in national states. In a very real sense, the national state as we know it today in the western world has been created by historians. The modern national state is a far cry from the amorphous non-national states of medieval and early modern times. The historian has created the vision of these states with analyses that made the growth of national states seem natural and inevitable. This synthetic feeling of togetherness became in time a genuine feeling.

This sort of historical analysis can be done quite unconsciously by the historian, but it may be done deliberately. There are a number of examples from the European experience in the nineteenth century when groups were called into being as nations by providing them with a history. We think of the Bohemians, the Poles, and the Irish, whose histories were invented to serve the cause of

romantic nationalism. It doesn't matter whether the analyses were true; what does matter is that they were accepted by the people concerned as true.

Consider the newly emergent African states. These states have been created by small groups of African nationalists, using western political and social ideas, often learned in European or American universities. The states that resulted were inhabited by people whose loyalties and traditions were tribal and local rather than national. Now these states must achieve internal unity. They are trying to do so by emphasizing past glories and common heroes, hoping that, in time, the people will give to these new political structures that same kind of fervant loyalty that western people give to their states. Thus, the African historian starts with the finished product, the national state, and provides it with suitable antecedents.

But the function of the historian does not end with the original concept of unity. An on-going state is always incomplete. It moves; it demands to know where it is and where it is going. The historian is indispensable in this process of explanation. The vision of the past which the historian constructs reflects his own fundamental attitudes toward his society. He looks at the past from the present; he is himself the product of history. He is virtually compelled to use his convictions about what the society ought to be like. I think this is particularly true if the historian is doing his job properly. It is not his function merely to grub up facts about the past; that is the least of it. It is the arrangement and presentation of the facts that matters. It is there that the historian serves society. He may serve other historians with his facts; he serves the public with his interpretations. The historian, when he does his job right, is a philosopher and a moralist. In the preface to a widely read and influential history of the United States of a generation ago, Charles Beard frankly said:

> The history of a civilization, if intelligently conceived, may be an instrument of civilization . . . . Dealing with all the manifestations of the inner powers of a people, as well as the trappings of war and politics, the history of a civilization is essentially dynamic, suggesting capabilities yet unexplored and hinting of emancipation from outward necessities. By the sharp questions it raises in every quarter it may give new direction to self-criticism and creative energy, aid in generating a richer 'intellectual climate,' and help in establishing the sovereignty of high plan, design, or ideal.[3]

Charles Beard believed that the historian must, by what he called an "act of faith," catch a vision of the world he wants and then use his interpretations of the past to help call his vision into being. Beard's call to his generation of historians did not go unheeded. He himself wanted a kind of collectivist democracy, socialism without Marx. Other historians have had different visions. The point is, I think, that all historians probably have some vision, though they may not always be aware of how this affects their writing and teaching.

The importance of historical interpretation in the life of an on-going society is this: at every stage, cultures, nations, groups must make choices. These choices are often agonizing, often controversial, often unclear. The choices may make drastic differences in the life of the group, and they must be made without any assurances of the ultimate outcome. In order to make choices in any way except the haphazard, the choice-makers must be aware of the alternatives. This is what the historian provides. His analysis of the past provides the framework within which the choices are laid out. If the analysis is wrong or corrupt, the choices cannot be made properly.

Consider the war in Viet Nam. The gradual decisions that have escalated the U.S. involvement there have been made within the context of analyses of the past, visions of the role of the United States after World War I, of our experiences with communism and fascism in the 1930's,

of our involvement in World War II, the Cold War, and Korea. Yalta, Potsdam, and Munich are inseparably bound up in the decisions that today affect Saigon and Hanoi.

Historians sometimes make mistakes in their analyses. When we do, a false or distorted picture of reality exists, one that is too far from the actual reality to work. Then the alternatives set out may be false, and wrong choices made in consequence. For example, the United States and Russia, for quite different reasons, withdrew from any active participation in European affairs after their involvement in World War I. Because these two potential super-powers failed to exercise any influence in the European world, the states of Europe were able for another generation to think that they were still the arbiters of the world as they had been before 1914. Historians in the United States and Europe failed to see that the actual power of Europe was distorted in an unreal situation. One consequence of this was the elevation of Mussolini's Italy into the status of a great power. So much attention was given to Italy, so much energy was expended by Britain and France in dealing with Italy, that a real menace of the 1930's, Japan, went almost unheeded. Our historical vision was so locked upon Europe that we, as historians, assumed that any European power was obviously more important than any Asiatic power.

The power of the historical sense to affect the present may be illustrated in many ways. England in 1940, under the leadership of Winston Churchill, was animated by a vision of her past that stiffened the wills of the people in the face of gloomy predictions of defeat.

We can find examples on the other side of the ideological fence as well. Hitler's Nazi movement knew the power of history to create present reality. All dictators know this and use it to fasten their power more firmly on their people. Hitler in his speeches and writings fabri-

cated for the German people a picture of a Germany betrayed in 1918 by cowardly and subversive civilians (Jews and Communists mostly) while a brave and undefeated army withstood all assaults on the western front. Brave the German army may have been; undefeated it wasn't. But Hitler's version of reality became the German people's vision of reality. For all practical purposes, it was true because they believed that it was and acted accordingly.

George Orwell's classic forecast of *1984* is familiar. His hero was an historian of sorts whose function it was to change the past to match shifts in party doctrine and personnel. Compare his work with this incident that happened not so many years ago in Russia. After the death of Stalin, one of the prominent casualties of the de-Stalinization purge was the chief of the secret police, Lavrenti Beria. After his execution, subscribers to the *Soviet Encyclopedia* received a package in the mail. In it was a letter directing them to cut out the article on Beria from their "B" volume and substitute for it an article on the Bering Strait.

This sort of distortion may be too clumsy to merit our serious attention. But it is a kindergarten-level example of a serious truth. Historians in their creation of effective reality may select some for oblivion, others for immortality. They may picture the past in such a way that some alternatives appear inevitable. In this area, the historian's public responsibility is not only real, it is singular. It goes beyond the obligation that all scholars have to speak the truth. Unlike many areas of knowledge, the work of the historian cannot easily be checked. There are no laboratory analyses that will validate his findings and indicate the realiability of his data. Yet, on the basis of his work, life-and-death decisions must be made.

This impact of historical analysis is not merely felt on group life; it may animate individuals who in turn

play large roles in decision making. We have already mentioned Winston Churchill whose debt to the past was obvious whenever he spoke. John Kennedy was another such statesman. Shortly after his assassination, Mrs. Kennedy said this of her husband:

> For a while I thought history was something that bitter old men wrote. But then I realized history made Jack what he was. You must think of him as this little boy, sick so much of the time, reading in bed, reading history, reading the Knights of the Round Table, reading Marlborough. For Jack, history was full of heroes. And if it made him this way — if it made him see the heroes—maybe other little boys will see. Men are such a combination of good and bad. Jack had this hero idea of history, the idealistic view.[4]

Not only is our vision of our own culture created by historical analysis, our view of other cultures and our relationships with them is similarly created. I said a moment ago that we had been European-centered too long. We are only beginning to realize the implications of our blindness. Historians are only beginning to see a more adequate picture of the world. The implications of this European orientation have been both positive and negative. We have often ignored Asia and Africa in our work. The result is an unconscious bias. If Asia and Africa do not appear in our versions of men and events, then the clear implication is that these areas do not matter and are not crucial in our lives. By failing to understand and interpret these areas, historians have signally distorted the decision-making process in the United States and Europe. I mentioned one consequence of this a moment ago. Only historians completely blind to reality could have taken Mussolini more seriously than they took Japan. Their blindness became the blindness of governments.

We are beginning to repair our perspective about Asia and Africa, but we have far to go. The typical

"world history" textbook in use in American colleges is little more than a western civilization text with some chapters on Asia and Africa thrown in to interrupt the narrative occasionally.[5]

A perfect example of this old attitude is contained in the preface to a book upon the European middle ages published in Great Britain and the United States a few months ago by an able but belligerent English historian, H. R. Trevor-Roper:

> Undergraduates, seduced as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history . . . If all history is equal, as some now believe, there is no reason why we should study one section of it rather than another; for certainly we cannot study it all. Then indeed we may neglect our own history and amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe: tribes whose chief function in history, in my opinion, is to show to the present an image of the past from which, by history, it has escaped . . .[6]

This ethnocentric statement probably needs little comment, except that we must acknowledge the painful truth in his first sentence. It *was* the clamor of our students that forced a widening of our interpretations to include the entire world. This is no occasion for congratulation on the part of the historical profession, only chagrin that others had to teach us what we should have been teaching them. We are now, however, conscious of this wider world; we are beginning to write and teach history in a more adequate way, a way that conforms more nearly to the evidence. From this re-examination and re-evaluation will come true world history, the history of the world

community. This, in turn, will bring fundamental changes in public attitudes toward Asia and Africa.

I wonder if we can really imagine the impact upon the world and its problems if a full generation of historians and students could view the world as a true community, composed of superficially different but fundamentally similar peoples who share common strivings, fears, failures, and dreams? This is not the same thing as preaching some vague universal culture; few people want that. But it does involve respect for all groups, a realization that progress is neither uniform nor confined to particular groups. Our view from Europe and America has been partial, and this has been not only unscholarly but dangerous and foolish as well.

The creation of effective reality is not confined to pictures of total groups. History may create sub-group identities and views as well. It may help to form the picture we have of racial and ethnic groups. It may also form the view these groups have of themselves. Malcolm X once observed: "The worst crime the white man has committed has been to teach us to hate ourselves."[7] Because of our limited vision, the Negro element in our national life has been virtually ignored. It may not have been, probably was not, positive prejudice on the part of historians. They knew little about the Negro, and so ignored him. Not only do many Caucasians assume that the Negro contribution to our development has been negligible, many Negroes make the same assumption. A vital part of the civil rights movement must be to rescue the Negro past, here and in Africa, from oblivion. This does not involve invention or distortion, only willingness to use the evidence we have and have had all along. Militant Negroes are aware of this need. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee issued a manifesto not many months ago in which these words are found: "If we are to proceed toward liberation, we must cut ourselves off from white people. We must form our own in-

stitutions, credit unions, coops, political parties, write our own history."[8] The historian can take present-day prejudices and spread them all over the past, making them seem the product of infinite, inevitable evolution.[9] By the same token, he can place these failings in their proper perspective, showing them for what they are, temporal, temporary, in no way inevitable or built into the nature of things.

If the historian does create effective reality, to whom or to what is he responsible for what he says and writes? Make no mistake about it, the history he produces is *his* product. He has abstracted, selected, and arranged his facts, filtered them through his judgments and convictions, and enlivened them with his imagination. There is not now and there never was any historian who ever described the past, in Ranke's phrase, "exactly as it happened." Indeed, to do so, if it were possible, would be to abrogate the historian's function. It is precisely judgment, conviction, and imagination that are required of him. To grub away at facts would be to serve nothing. His job is a professional one, not one of cataloguing.

When I was a young graduate student, this question of responsibility was raised for me in a dramatic way. I was just beginning to feel a member of the historical craft; my first seminars and seminar papers were in the immediate past. In late December of 1949, the then Dean of historians of England in the United States, Conyers Read, delivered his presidential address to the American Historical Association. His title, nearly the same as mine tonight, was "The Social Responsibilities of the Historian."[10] Composed in the full flush of the early Cold War, it was an appeal for historians to commit themselves to a democratic way of life and refrain from undermining it in their teaching and writing. He asked them to promote patriotism at a critical moment in the nation's life. This promotion would involve a favorable interpretation by historians of our national experience. Let me quote to

you some phrases from that address, for I have never forgotten them:

> If historians, in their examinations of the past, represent the evolution of mankind as haphazard, without direction and without progress, offering no assurance that mankind's present position is on the highway and not on some dead end, then mankind will seek for assurance in a more positive alternative whether it be offered from Rome or from Moscow.

Or again:

> This sounds like the advocacy of one form of social control as against another. In short, it is. But I see no alternative in a divided world . . . . . The important thing is that we shall accept and endorse such controls as are essential for the preservation of our way of life . . . . It does mean that we accept certain fundamental values as beyond dispute.

And finally:

> We shall still like the doctor have to examine social pathology if only to diagnose the nature of the disease. But we must realize that not everything that takes place in the laboratory is appropriate for broadcasting at the street corners.

These phrases, particularly the last, which seemed a clear call to conceal disreputable facts about the past, destroyed several days of my graduate education. We graduate students passionately debated these issues up and down the corridors of library and classroom buildings. We finally organized an extracurricular meeting to debate them more formally. Some of the younger members of the faculty joined us. This was a long time ago, of course, and these young faculty members did not realize that teachers and students should have nothing to do with each other on university campuses.

I have thought of these discussions many times in the years since. I am no longer quite sure what I thought and

said at the time, though probably I said a great deal regardless of the amount of thought. I remember that the burden of my objection to Read's thesis in those days was my conviction that it was the duty of the historian to speak the truth, no matter how unpleasant it was. His responsibility, I thought, was to something higher than himself, his craft, his nation, an abstract, never-changing truth. This youthful devotion to truth served no purpose, of course. As Professor Sibley remarked at the very opening of her Faculty Lecture last year, "Everybody is on the side of truth." My feeling now, sixteen years and some four thousand students later, is that Conyers Read was quite wrong, but for different reasons than I thought then.

The historian commits an unforgivable error in accepting "certain fundamental values as beyond dispute." He defeats the purpose of his craft. He is responsible to society, the larger civilization, perhaps even to mankind, but not to offer blind support to commonly accepted notions. We have politicians and generals for that. Society cannot be frozen in that way and remain viable. It is the responsibility of the historian to raise, quite deliberately and without apology, all aspects of his culture to close and continuous historical scrutiny. It is his responsibility to reexamine constantly all those "fundamental values" precisely because the society may consider them "beyond dispute." These values may be outmoded, may be dangerous to the society which holds them in reverence. We cannot know unless we constantly look. We must ask each institution to stand the test of examination: how and why was such an institution devised, how effectively has it served, how well does it meet present needs? For example, the historian is aware that the national state, now so common in the western world, is a relative newcomer. It is not necessarily the ultimate organizational invention of mankind. If the historian assumes it is and shapes his history without ever examining his belief further, he may perpetuate an institution far beyond its

usefulness. It has been done. Generations of medieval German rulers delayed the development of Germany while pursuing an antique vision of the Roman Empire. We are not immune to that blindness.

Historical reexaminations may not all be so fundamental, but they are none the less essential. If historians fail to make viable conclusions from their evidence and create a distorted view of reality, then the societies in which they live will make fundamental errors of judgment. Let me give you an illustration.

Historians have often said that the United States has pursued a role of basic isolationism in world affairs. This has become a common assumption for most Americans. On this assumption, the return of the United States from Europe after World War I was a resumption of her normal posture. Since World War II we assume that the United States has broken its traditional rules about "foreign entanglements." We have many people in this country who regret this deviation from our "natural role." These interpretations illustrate how we can compartment our minds, blinding ourselves to facts that were always there. The United States, from the earliest days of its independence, has played an active international role; it was never really isolationist. But our foreign involvements were always more Asiatic than European, more Pacific than Atlantic. The interpretation of America's world position has been done by historians whose basic interest was Europe, and who assumed that isolation from Europe was isolation from the world. We ended up with the ironic situation that our march to the Far East, always well known, failed to make much impact upon our interpretation of America's world position. This confusion may have real bearing on our views toward the position of the United States in Viet Nam.

Many of our current internal problems can be clarified only through the work of historians. Some of our citizens are distressed by the enlarging role of the federal government in our lives, and the seeming demotion of the state and local governments. Historians must show us that America as it used to be—the elm-tree lined streets of the small towns, the rural-oriented citizens of sturdy Calvinist convictions, the isolation of recent immigrants in urban ghettos, where they were organized by political bosses who failed to pronounce their consonants in quite an American way—has been transmuted into the urbanized, asphalted, shopping-centered, traffic-jammed United States of today. This new America seems to some of our people to be a betrayal of the original ideas and principles of those who founded and nurtured the nation. The changes in public functions, in the scope and purpose of government, in the collective aspects of our lives, anger them deeply. They see conspiracy in it; there is not. There is only change. The Founding Fathers were innovators in their day. Their America is mostly gone. No one forgets them or their influence on us, but their solutions were for other problems than ours. Time never stands still, and it is dangerous to think it does. The historians must illuminate these changes and show the causes. Regardless of our love for the past and our determination to preserve its best features, nothing ever stays the same. Life is synonymous with change. The historian's public responsibility is to show that.

II

There is a second phase of the historian's public responsibility. What role should he play in the actual conduct of public life? Are there particular contributions he might make because of his training and habits of mind?

There is no question that academics in general, and historians among them, are far more at the center of what we wistfully call the "real world" than ever before. This

has been the trend since the days of Roosevelt's Brain Trust. In our increasingly technocratic society, the services of the so-called "expert" are essential; government is too complicated for politicians alone. Even Lyndon Johnson, who is not known for his cordial relationship with intellectuals, recognizes this. In a speech some months ago at Princeton, he said:

> The intellectual today is very much an inside man. Since the 1930's our government has put into effect major policies which men of learning have helped to fashion. In almost every field of governmental concern, from economics to national security, the academic community has become a central instrument of government policy.
>
> So many are the consultants called from behind the ivy that a university friend of mine recently said, "At any given moment a third of the faculties of the United States are on a plane going somewhere to advise if not always to consent."[11]

President Johnson went on to say that he had within his cabinet seven former professors, and that he had appointed, in the first two and one-half years of his tenure in the White House, 371 major officials who had 758 advanced degrees among them. These officials were, of course, from many disciplines, with relatively few historians among them.

Historians have been pulled into prominent, if not always vital, positions in several recent administrations. Because government today badly needs the services of what one newspaper columnist called the "knowledge community," there has been a great deal of governmental effort to woo scholars, hoping both to obtain active participation in government service and the good will and understanding of the university communities. The specimen intellectuals, the so-called "intellectuals in residence" at the White House in recent years, have been historians. Two of them were of national reputation,

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Eric Goldman. The incumbent, John Roche, lacks the same reputation but is undeniably a scholar. For the sort of role they have been given, mediating between the active world of politics and the presumably more tranquil world of the universities, historians are the logical choice. Their training provides them with the breadth of view and knowledge that will give them an entree into most areas of university life. However, the well-known difficulties of President Johnson and the intellectuals generally suggest that any rapprochement between scholars and politicians is not easy and is perhaps impossible.

Our question is, however, what is the specific responsibility of the historian in government service and public life? Walter Lippmann, a better historian than most, for all his journalistic life, once said:

> The world will go on somehow, and more crises will follow. It will go on best, however, if among us there are men who have stood apart, who refused to be anxious or too much concerned, who were cool and inquiring and had their eyes on the longer past and a longer future. By their example they can remind us that the passing moment is only a moment; by their loyalty they will have cherished those things which only the disinterested mind can use.[12]

Interestingly enough, these words were quoted by Arthur Schlesinger as he mused on the involvement of the historian in the direct activity of government at the beginning of his service in the Kennedy Administration. Schlesinger saw many advantages to an active role by the historian, both for the contribution which the historian could make in the shaping of government policy and the insights he could gain into the world of politics, a world about which he often writes but seldom inhabits. Actual government work might make him a better historian.

By the same token, there are drawbacks. "To act," Schlesinger admitted, "is, in many cases, to give hostages—to parties, to policies, to persons." Most critics have found the greatest weakness in Schlesinger's fine history of the Kennedy administration, *A Thousand Days*, to be his treatment of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, a decision in which he himself participated and may have wished to rationalize.

But these considerations do not solve our real problem: does the historian have a fundamental responsibility and a unique qualification for participation in public affairs? I think the answer is yes, but we must define public service broadly.

The historian may offer great talents in direct government service. His training may make him invaluable in government. He must, however, abandon his aspirations to scholarship if he enters government service. He cannot have it both ways. He cannot expect to undertake an active governmental career, remain a scholar, and expect that his statements and opinions will be accepted as those of an impartial observer. He will not have time to continue that involvement with the past through his reading and thinking that will allow him to remain an historian. This is a sacrifice he must make, and it is a real one.

But public service may take other forms. The role of the college historian *is* a public one, and it is here that I think he can make his most useful and worthwhile contribution to the public welfare. It is an area in which the scholar excels in his own element and can be a vital factor in the formation of public policy. Russell Kirk reminds us of Nietzsche's dictum, "In politics, the professor always plays the comic role." I suspect the scholar-historian in actual government service is unable to take the simple view of action that politics demands.

His view of the truth is too complicated, and so he appears indecisive.

If the historian chooses to remain in the college or university, then he must realize that his competence in history will not give him automatic contact with the truth in all current political and social dilemmas. He may be a fine historian and have no worthwhile views about Viet Nam. In areas outside his competence, he must be content to act as a private citizen. The time involved in achieving even minimal success as an historian or scholar of any kind virtually precludes involvement in "causes."

The historian's most productive role in public affairs lies in teaching and writing, in the shaping of what we have come to call "the climate of opinion." Here his function is clear; his competence is unquestioned. Even those who regret the attitudes of the scholarly communities are willing to say that they are influential. Chesly Manly, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, hardly a scholarly trade journal, ruefully admitted a few months ago:

> To a large extent, the climate of opinion is made by the professors. Thru textbooks and classroom lectures, they influence students, including prospective teachers for the nation's schools and colleges, to accept and even to clamor for "liberal" government policies.[13]

Mr. Manly's fear of the role of professors may be overdrawn; they are probably not as influential as he thinks. They should be. The trouble is that they have exerted so little influence, have so little felt their public responsibilities.

In this function, his primary one, what does the historian owe society? What sorts of explanations has society a right to expect from the historian as he discharges his public role? Let me suggest some answers.

The thousands of students who pass through the collective hands of the historical guild every year have a healthy, skeptical attitude toward history. They tend to agree with Mark Twain that they "don't take no stock in dead people." Students are, we are reminded, wildly concerned with social problems that appeal to them for solution: war, peace, communism, poverty, racial discrimination. The historian, in his work of interpretation, must provide them with perspectives on these problems. His role lies in interpretations, not so much in facts. But he must show how social problems can be analyzed, how their causes and ramifications can be sought, how they have been attacked in the past, and why they remain with us.

I do not want to be misunderstood at this point. All young history graduate students are carefully nurtured in an historiographical tradition that decrees that the past must be studied for its own sake and must be evaluated in its own terms. People of the past cannot be retroactively condemned because they fail to share the historian's personal moral convictions. All this is true and prerequisite to good history. I am not saying that the study of history must be undertaken with only the problems of the present in the forefront. I am saying, though, that the study of history must be undertaken with the idea that all research and teaching should fit into the search for the understanding of man and his vital human problems. A professional historian is denied the luxury of studying the past entirely for his personal pleasure. If most historians were willing to be perfectly candid (and I've known many that were candid, though few that were perfect), they would admit to you, as I do, that they were not motivated to become historians out of any overweening desire to serve humanity, but simply because they love history for itself, in itself, by itself. Of course! This is probably true of 80% of all academics. But having chosen the profession, a professional obligation intrudes. To teach the past either as a catalogue of facts or as a

delightfully quaint place where people do all sorts of odd things that they don't do today is to deny all professional intent. The past, for the historian in his public capacity, must be a source of materials with which he pursues his quarry: man. It is always man, as a social animal in motion, that we are pursuing. This dictates our choice of field and study; this determines the kind of courses we offer. I once knew an historian who offered a course on "Great Men in American History." Was this intended as a vehicle from which generalizations might be sought on important things, such as how men rise to leadership in an egalitarian democracy, what types of men respond best to specific challenges in the past, or what is the role of leadership itself in a democracy? No, it was a sort of post-mortem gossip orgy. It was interesting, but worthless, because it had no professional intent.

This raises another issue. Does the historian, then, make value judgments about his subject matter? Does he range like the mind of God over the past, lifting up the fallen and casting down the wicked? In many ways he does. His work is not objective; he is not a scientist. He intrudes himself upon his work. Even his choice of fields is rather a value judgment. His work is not to condemn, but to understand, but that in itself is a value judgment.

What keeps the historian from degenerating into a mere propagandist, if all this is true? Not as much as you may think. There is, however, professional pride, along with the opinions and reviews of fellow historians. There are no regulatory agencies which compel him toward honesty in his research, writing, and teaching. But he *must* speak the truth, and surprisingly, there is little evidence that much deliberate distortion is produced. We may be ignorant and short-sighted, but usually honest.

Teaching should occur through writing and could reach, in that form, the larger public outside the universities and colleges. Here, the historical profession has

not served its public function very adequately in recent years. Professional historians have largely abandoned the field of public education through writing. They write for each other instead, in great thumping monographs which few will read or understand. Such works must be produced, of course, for they are the grist out of which synthesis occurs. But the synthesis that often appears in the classroom seldom appears in books and articles designed for the serious general reader. The few historians who do try to reach this audience are often condemned by their fellow historians for being "shallow." But students and the larger public *want* the insights into the human condition that the historian can provide. When books that seem to give these insights appear they become best sellers. Look at Barbara Tuchman's book, *The Proud Tower*, splendidly written, fascinating to read, but lacking in that final requirement of the historian: hard, sustained grappling with the human condition. Miss Tuchman might have done it; her previous book, *The Guns of August*, did it. When it is done, it is not only great literature, but great history, and great history is a public service. Another case in point is the current craze for books about the Civil War. Thousands of books have been produced, many of them well written, but with little real effort to assess the long-term impact of that struggle on this republic.

III

Fate, economics, and possibly a lack of alternatives dictate that the major arena for the historian in the United States shall be the college and university communities. What public responsibility has the historian here? The historian's role is dictated by the larger role of the colleges and universities themselves.

The public sometimes conceives of the academic world as a somewhat more sophisticated and certainly more expensive modern version of the old wise men of

the tribe, sitting around the fire on long winter evenings, relating the details of the culture to the young, so that these oncoming members of the group will be ready, in their turn, to shoulder adult responsibilities. This sort of role would be possible only in a small, static society. It is entirely inadequate in the overwhelmingly complicated societies of today. Culture, remember, is not a deposit, but an on-going process, and the students we teach are not apprentice human beings that we are supposed to finish off and then launch into the real world in a dignified ceremony called "commencement."

The colleges are, or ought to be, communities of scholars who fulfill an active, vital, continuous set of responsibilities for modern society. They discover its pills, test its roads, design its buildings, experiment with its foods, evaluate its public schools, write its books. Above all, they are communities of continuous interpretation, keeping the culture in touch with itself as it moves forward. Society has loaded the colleges and universities with many extraneous tasks, primarily because they were there, and there were no other public agencies to carry on research. Some of these jobs actually inhibit the primary work of the academic communities by obscuring this basic responsibility of interpreting the culture in all its aspects and disseminating these interpretations. This work of interpretation is not something which faculties do, and then pass along to students. It is something the whole community, faculty and students together, does constantly. This demands an interaction between faculty and students. In some of the larger universities, students have, in the past few years, made some very severe judgments about a lack of faculty-student interaction. In a very complicated society, the colleges and universities must constantly keep the entire culture in view, define it, redefine it, rejoice in its strengths, identify its weaknesses, sometimes urge it to action.

Within this community of interpretation, the historian must take a central role, because his job is anterior to the others. Without the view of man which only the historian is prepared to give, that total, moving view, the other disciplines cannot function. Much of the work of other disciplines, particularly the so-called "social sciences," becomes meaningful only after it has been integrated into the work of the historian and passes, in that fashion, into history itself.

The historian, within the community, sees man in all his bewildering, fascinating, heart-breaking complexity. He sees a Churchill, a Vermeer, a St Augustine, but he also sees Dachau, Auschwitz, Bataan, the KKK, and Verwoerd. Even that is not enough, for he also sees an Assurbanipal, who killed but collected books. All this information must be arranged by historians and others within the community into socially useful patterns, so that the culture will have what Martin Marty calls "participation information." Providing this information is the job of the historian and the whole academic community.

> When a culture begins to disintegrate it does so, not because the seasons have changed, not because it is old and decrepit, not even because it has met an external injury or shock, but because its guiding theme, which bound all the parts of it together, political activities and economic affairs—and art and philosophy, too—has become exhausted: the acts of progressive self-revelation and self-understanding have been played out to their appointed end. The operative cause, which touches every institution simultaneously, is the collapse of meaning: the disintegration, not simply of this or that part, but of the overall pattern.[14]

This will happen if the colleges and universities fail in their job.

We have been exploring the public responsibilities of the historian. Are they really as great as I've suggested?

Yes, they are. We all know that the world is changing around us rapidly. There has been more change in the last fifty years than in the previous 500 years. That rate of change is constantly accelerating. It will continue to do so. The world's population is growing at a fantastic rate; that, in itself, is going to change everything. We are seeing the "revolutions of expectations" in Asia and Africa and Latin America as these people demand a share of the world's good life.

Familiar institutions and ideas are going to die around us. We have seen one such change in the drastic diminution of the position and influence of organized religion in our society. There will be other changes equally great and equally frightening. Maintaining a firm hold on the past will be increasingly important, both in recognizing changes and in identifying new institutions rising to replace the old. It will give us increasing control over the social environment to match our material prowess. Much of our cultural heritage will become outmoded and will be replaced, but much must be remembered. The task of maintaining a meaningful and useful vision of reality is the historian's public responsibility.

NOTES

1. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review*, Vol. XXXVII, # 2, January, 1932, pp. 221-236.

2. Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951, p. 122.

3. Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, New York: Macmillan, revised edition, 1933, p. vii.

4. Mrs. Kennedy was quoted by Theodore White in "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue," *Life*, December 6, 1963.

5. A splendid exception to the rule is William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

6. H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe*, London: Thames and Hudson, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965, p. 9.

7. Quoted by Leon F. Litwack, in a review of Charles Wesley's book, *Neglected History: Essays in Negro History by a College President*, *American Historical Review*, vol. LXXI, # 3, April, 1966, p. 1069.

8. *Time Magazine*, August 12, 1966.

9. On this point see the essay of Herbert Butterfield, "The Dangers of History, in *History and Human Relations*, New York: Macmillan, 1952, pp. 158-181.

10. Conyers Read, "The Social Responsibilities of the Historian," *American Historical Review*, vol. LV, # 2, January, 1960, pp. 275-285.

11. *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1966.

12. Quoted by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historian and History," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 41, # 3, April, 1963, p. 491.

13. Chesly Manly, *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1966.

14. Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life*, p. 220.

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