

CHAPTER XIII

LIBERALS AND INTELLECTUALS

“It is not enough to lend your talents to merely discussing the issues and deploring their solutions.” -John F. Kennedy¹

As a visible liberal intellectual, Arthur Schlesinger has appeared to many a symbol of all that is wrong with pragmatic liberalism. Some of the critiques of Schlesinger have focused on contradictions in his philosophy. Garry Wills’ *Nixon Agonistes* goes to the heart of the theoretical flaws in pragmatic liberalism. Wills starts by examining Schlesinger’s classifications of thought: Ideas and Ideology. While ideas are specific thoughts about specific issues, ideology is an all-encompassing world-view applicable to every problem, says Schlesinger. Schlesinger the pragmatist likes ideas, and dislikes ideologies. But, argues Wills, Schlesinger uses “ideology” merely as a “cuss-word” for ideas he does not like. Because Schlesinger too, according to Wills, has his own ideology. He quotes Schlesinger’s words that even the pragmatic liberal may have his own “submerged and absolute literal faith.” Therefore, says Wills, “value-free” liberalism is a farce; for even pragmatists ultimately rest their pragmatism on an ideology.²

Wills does have a point. After all, a particular “idea” is useful insofar as it is a pragmatic approach towards the achievement of a certain goal. But without an “ideology” to define that goal, one has no goal to pragmatically achieve. And Schlesinger’s thinking is not completely free of dogma. As Carol Englehardt pointed out, “It is ironic that (Schlesinger’s) political thought displays such remarkable continuity in a time of great social change.”³

The Wills-Englehardt critique misses its mark in several important ways, though. To begin with, regardless of the merit of any of Schlesinger’s particular ideas, he has revised some opinions substantially. Long before many other anti-Communists did, he recognized the polycentric, bureaucratic nature of Communism, and retreated from his earlier, more strident attitude.

Secondly, Wills misses a finer distinction of Schlesinger’s: the distinction between ideology and ideals. According to Schlesinger, “Ideals refer to the long run goals ... and the spirit in which the goals are pursued. Ideology is something different, more systematic, more comprehensive, more dogmatic....The ideological fallacy is to forget that ideology is an abstraction from reality and to regard it as reality itself.”⁴

Asked to define the liberal’s “submerged and literal faith,” Schlesinger mentioned simply operating from the context of “traditional Christian values” and “democracy.”⁵ If Wills and the rest cannot distinguish between all-encompassing world-views such as Fascism, Communism, or fundamentalist Christianity and faith in “democracy,” they miss an obvious quantitative difference.

Further, evidence that Schlesinger’s vocabulary and metaphysics are contradictory does little to weaken the liberal approach to politics. Wills proves his

¹ collected speeches, “Citizens of the World: The Duty of the Scholar,” *The Strategy of Peace* (New York, 1960), 188-189.

² Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 326.

³ Carol Englehardt, “Man in the Middle: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Postwar American Liberalism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Spring 1981).

⁴ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The One Against the Many,” from *Paths of American Thought* (Boston, 1963), 534.

⁵ Interview 3/29/82. Rather like Franklin Roosevelt’s “I am a Christian and a Democrat.”

points, and proclaims that he has shown the failure of twentieth-century liberalism. But he fails to grasp the essential point of post-war liberalism's view of man. Had Wills spent more time reading Niebuhr, and less reading dictionaries, he would have seen that the Schlesinger-Niebuhr philosophy rests on the inability of man through rational thought to penetrate the universe. Niebuhr would argue that given the limitations of man's reason, any man-made philosophy is likely to be incomplete, or to distort reality so much in an attempt to achieve consistency as to be useless. As Schlesinger explained, "I'm an agnostic. I'm sufficiently persuaded by the Christian doctrines of frailty of man to doubt man's capacity to penetrate the absolute. Niebuhr would agree with that, but would say if you're fortunate, grace descends upon you and you believe."⁶ Without grace, and given the limitations of man, how can one expect a man-made philosophy to provide a completely accurate, consistent picture of reality?

Schlesinger's philosophy, made without divine assistance, is in some way flawed, as are all human philosophies. But with what would Wills replace Schlesinger's imperfect liberalism? Another man-made philosophy? Or does Wills have a hot-line to God? Because that no man can create a completely consistent philosophy, the best test of a philosophy's worth is its practical effects. My argument, is I realize incomplete, for judging the practical effects requires the yard-stick of ideals or ideology. But common sense must stop the metaphysics at some point. Anyone reasonable person can see that liberal democracies provide materially and spiritually for their own citizens far better than do any of the alternatives. If as Wills argues, liberalism has been the guiding philosophy of America since before independence, it would be absurd to cast off liberalism until, regardless of the abstractions, one finds another guiding philosophy likely to provide better for Americans.

The more telling attacks on Schlesinger's liberalism have come not from the pens of academics, but from the popular reaction to the perceived practical effects of that liberalism. A 1967 letter to *Time* magazine summed up a great deal: "Governor Reagan is saying that there is a point beyond which you cannot go in asking people to bear the cost of government. While this idea is probably too deep for Arthur Schlesinger the average voter may be more in favor of Reagan's so-called 'unpopular moves' than Schlesinger thinks."⁷ Sad to say, Schlesinger's liberalism has lost touch with America, at least temporarily.

But even if Schlesinger's 1933 takes longer to arrive than he expects, the tides of American politics will one day flow back towards liberalism. The question confronting Schlesinger and the rest of the Democratic party is to what extent the new liberalism that arises will resemble the liberalism of Schlesinger, Galbraith, Humphrey, and the ADA that served the party so well for so long.

Today "neo-liberals" proclaim themselves the tough-minded, pragmatic heirs of Kennedy. Although the definitions of neo-liberalism vary, old liberals consider it a movement whose main thrust is to reject affirmative government. Asked about the place of the neo-liberals in the Democratic future, Galbraith replied:

There are some things in the liberal past, such as the overall management of the economy, which turned out to be weak. But the notion that liberals can abandon support for the poor, and the abandoned, the regulatory apparatus that has been made necessary by high technology, detach the federal government from its social responsibilities is nonsense. What liberalism must

⁶ Interview 1/14/82.

⁷ "Letters," *Time* (Mar.3, 1967), 13.

do is compensate for its past weakness, which has been in macroeconomic management of the economy, and affirm its past areas of strength, which are very good. (The danger is that Reaganism) will unravel so rapidly that liberals can sit back and relax and not do any thinking.⁸

Professor Schlesinger agreed with Galbraith in his evaluation of neo-liberalism:

I think it's a lot of nonsense. These people think that Ronald Reagan had some secret, and if they could only learn that secret they could be popular too. But if the U. S. wants a conservative government it's going to turn to a Republican every time. We're giving conservatism a big try; if it fails we're not going to turn to me-too Reaganites like Paul Tsongas. They're going to turn to people who stand for an alternative. The great issue of our time is will our problems solve themselves, or is there some need for the application of intelligence and management? The Reagan view is that the government is the root of all evil, and once we get the government off our backs all our problems will take care of themselves. Insofar as people like Tsongas take that view and join in the denigration of government, as Jimmy Carter did, they disqualify themselves from any future in an alternative policy to Reagan.⁹

As the Schlesingers' own books have explained so clearly, each new phase of progressivism abandons the unrealistic aspects of the previous one. Andrew Jackson rejected the Jeffersonian notion of an agrarian state; Roosevelt and Wilson realized that world of perfect capitalist competition from the early Industrial Revolution had long since passed; Franklin Roosevelt understood that the Progressive ideals of the Social Gospel were inappropriate to coping with the challenge of the Depression; Adlai Stevenson and John Kennedy knew that faith in the New Deal was not enough to understand the complexities of the New Industrial State. And perhaps the next generation of liberals will see that while Presidential initiative may play a large role in American life, a new government agency may not be the best solution to every problem. With much accuracy, liberals like Galbraith have detailed the bureaucratization of the gigantic corporation, and conservatives have detailed the hazards of the bureaucratic, gargantuan federal government. The solution will not be to choose one bureaucracy over the other, but to find solutions that rely on neither civil servants nor the beneficence of non-existent free market of small independent firms.

There are certain problems for which government spending is no answer. The old liberal attempt to end poverty through transfer payments has been as futile as Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam escalation policy. In 1966, Robert Kennedy pointed the way to another approach, through his Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. Kennedy's plan brought government, business, and community leaders together to encourage investment and hope. Fifteen years before Urban Enterprise Zones were discovered by the Heritage Foundation's Stuart Butler, Kennedy proposed to reduce tax rates in ghetto areas.¹⁰ The Kennedy approach did more for Bedford-Stuyvesant than all the bureaucrats in the Hubert H. Humphrey Health and Human Services Building have since.

⁸ Interview 12/8/82.

⁹ Interview 1/14/82.

¹⁰ Kennedy did not feel, as do the authors of the current Urban Enterprise Zone bill, that safety and health regulations stifled free enterprise.

In the late 1960's, Richard Goodwin and Robert Kennedy saw local democracy as the most appropriate answer to many of America's problems. And today, the "guiding hand" and Washington D.C. are not the only options available to America. Accepting that the federal government is not always the answer does not mean despairing of a solution.

In that the American electorate seems unlikely to repudiate the Republican party merely for the sake of "Reaganism with a Human Face," Schlesinger and Galbraith are correct.¹¹ But Schlesinger and his compatriots must accept that on a pragmatic level, certain liberal programs have failed, and the Democrats will not become the party of national progress again until they discover convincing alternatives.

Still, if the next step in the liberal process may reject some of Schlesinger's faith in the liberal government, no one should doubt that his ideals and ideas have helped make America a better nation. As ADA Chair Robert Drinan said in the summer of 1981:

If people say that the liberals are outdated and tired, they should at least give the liberals credit for what they've done. Going way back to the elimination of the poll tax, we've had so many victories along the way. Ours is the tradition that helped bring about many things, like the civil rights bill of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the fair housing bill of 1968 . ADA goes back to Hubert Humphrey, Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr and to Arthur Schlesinger. Liberals have constructed an America that we know.¹²

But when the New Left thinks of Arthur Schlesinger, it thinks not of the accomplishments of the ADA, but of the corruption of the intellectual. Christopher Lasch, in a pair of splenetic essays, has detailed the case against Schlesinger. Schlesinger, says Lasch, served as a conscious agent of the Cold War, not only through the Congress for Cultural Freedom and *Encounter* magazine, but through his whole philosophy and career. Charging the Democratic liberals with abetting America's course in the cold war, Lasch faults Schlesinger and Niebuhr for raising political issues to philosophical questions and for confusing "freedom with the interests of the United States."¹³ The idea is probably too deep for the comprehension of Christopher Lasch, but Stalinism and Communism are bad, and American liberal democracy is good. American democracy has its flaws, but anyone who cannot see a moral difference between the Stalinism and American democracy is short-sighted to the point of deliberate blindness. As George Orwell said, some ideas are so stupid that only an intellectual could believe them.

Does Lasch seriously mean to argue that the geopolitical interests of the United States in promoting the Marshall Plan, building NATO, and saving Western Europe from Soviet domination were not coincident with the interests of freedom and justice? Quemoy and Matsu may not have been clear-cut cases of right and wrong, but Berlin was.¹⁴

¹¹ "Reaganism with a Human Face," was *The New Republic*'s label for Massachusetts Senator Paul Tsongas' new book.

¹² "Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself is Plenty, in 1981, for Democrats," *Washington Post* (Jun. 28, 1981). The article quoted Schlesinger's 1954 words about the surprising revival of conservatism as a respectable political philosophy.

¹³ Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America: 1889-1963* (New York, 1960), 309. *The Agony of the American Left*, 69.

¹⁴ Quemoy and Matsu were two Nationalist-held islands off the Chinese coast. Eisenhower Secretary of

To Lasch, the “corruptions” of *Encounter* are typical of the evils any intellectual submits to by being involved in power and government. The notion that an intellectual could positively affect the course of government from within seems to him ridiculous: “The war machine cannot be influenced by the advice of well-meaning intellectuals in the inner councils of government; it can only be resisted.”¹⁵ Lasch’s statement is typical of the paranoia that has made the New Left such an irrelevant force in American reform. One need only read *A Thousand Days* to see how difficult it is for an intellectual to battle the national security bureaucracy, but to imagine that the bureaucracy is a juggernaut war machine is absurd. Leaders of war machines are not willing to sacrifice their political futures for Test- Ban treaties.

Although involvement in power need not necessarily lead to becoming a pawn of the “war machine,” the intellectual in power cannot avoid corruption, as John Kenneth Galbraith explained:

It’s impossible. You are swept into a big organization; the organization view comes down on you. There are times when you must defend it. Otherwise you’re worthless. And the only hope is that you understand that is what is happening. The corruption that you subordinate your ideas to those of the State Department or the White House or the Department of Agriculture or the Department of Labor, or depending on where you are, is inevitable. What you hope for is that you know you’re doing it, that you don’t fool yourself into feeling the organization is right. I noticed all through my years in Washington, and particularly in the State Department, those who occasionally would take the State Department line when they didn’t like it, and those who would force themselves to like it..¹⁶

Schlesinger too believes that even in power an intellectual may stay true to truth: “It is entirely possible to deal with practical realities without yielding inner convictions; it is entirely possible to compromise in program and action without compromising in ideals and values.”¹⁷ Rejecting Lasch’s prescriptions for the way to the “truth,” Schlesinger argued:

The notion still lingers that the only appropriate position for the intellectual is unrelenting hostility to his society. This notion, I believe, is sadly wrong. It is wrong because its insistence on a single role for the intellectual binds the free mind and contradicts the whole premise of intellectual life--the belief in the diversity and spontaneity of ideas. It is wrong, moreover, because the role appointed either denies the intellectual’s essential responsibility, which is the search for knowledge and understanding, or else forecloses the search by assuming its conclusion in advance. More than that, it is stupidly self-defeating because those who acquiesce in the idea, more often propagated by anti-intellectuals, that intelligence has no role in public affairs, voluntarily resign power to Goethe’s diplomats and soldiers--as if the ordinary course of things had not given diplomats and soldiers enough responsibility already.¹⁸

State John Foster Dulles bragged of taking the world to the brink of nuclear war to keep them out of Communist hands.

¹⁵ Lasch, *New Radicalism*, 111-112.

¹⁶ Interview 12/8/81.

¹⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Ideas and Responsibility: The Intellectual and Society,” Inaugural lecture at the City University of New York, Oct. 25, 1966), 23.

¹⁸ Schlesinger, “Ideas and Responsibility,” 24.

Arthur Schlesinger's own career has been a repudiation of the idea that intellectuals have no role in the active world of politics. As he would admit, he has been corrupted by the necessities of power. He has sometimes put political gain ahead of simple morality, and did share a hand in the Bay of Pigs. Such are the inevitable corruptions of power.

But the corruption must be weighed pragmatically against his positive contributions. He helped put sick Europe back on its feet with the Marshall Plan. He founded a group that carried the cause of progressive reform in a time of complacency. With Adlai Stevenson he laid out America's agenda for its next era of progress. Serving in the White House, he contributed to Civil Rights. Against the obsessive conservatism of the bureaucracy, he fought for a progressive foreign policy. Two and a half years after John Kennedy promised to "fight any foe," he proposed "a world of diversity"; Kennedy's friend Arthur Schlesinger lost many battles with the State Department, but he won the war for the President's mind. Although Schlesinger never fully understood the Vietnam war, he played his part in the opposition. And remaining true to his liberal principles, he gave Robert Kennedy better advice than all professionals. Operating from humane and realistic principles, he has helped guide American thought and action to liberal goals. He may have sold his soul to the party, but he has something to show for it.

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