

## CHAPTER XI

### IN OPPOSITION AGAIN

*"I would say the relationship between the Kennedys and the Johnson White House is not unlike the one between Hubert Humphrey and the Kennedy White House: friendship, but now and then wondering why the administration doesn't do more. But there is certainly no guerilla warfare or anything like that."* - Arthur Schlesinger Jr.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger and Marian Cannon separated in 1965. She remained in Washington while he moved to Princeton, to begin work on volume four of *The Age of Roosevelt*.<sup>2</sup> After spending most of 1966 at Princeton, he moved to New York, where he became the first holder of one of the Albert Schweitzer Chairs for the Humanities at the City University of New York. The generously-endowed chair provided \$100,000 annually for expenses, of which Schlesinger took \$32,000 as salary.<sup>3</sup> Schlesinger accepted "partly because the Schweitzer chair offered me more opportunity for my own writing and research and partly, I guess, because I had lived forty years of my life in Cambridge and felt that the time had come for a change."<sup>4</sup>

Schlesinger was accused of being one of the new generation of super-professors, hired at astronomical prices more for their status than their teaching ability. One article, "Professors as Bonus Babies," compared Schlesinger to football superstar Joe Namath.<sup>5</sup>

Schlesinger saw more and more of Robert Kennedy. They talked on the phone daily, as Schlesinger became one of Kennedy's "utility infielders."<sup>6</sup> Eugene McCarthy dubbed Schlesinger one of Bobby Kennedy's "Knights of the Round Table."<sup>7</sup> Both in New York and at Hyannis Port, Schlesinger became closer and closer to Kennedy. The closer he became, the more protective they became of each other, and the more Schlesinger rejected the myth of Robert Kennedy's ruthlessness.<sup>8</sup>

Robert Kennedy was not the only person who wanted to see Schlesinger. In New York he partied with the beautiful people. *Time* ran an article called "Swinging Soothsayer," along with a picture of Schlesinger escorting Jacqueline Kennedy to the movies. The article revealed that Schlesinger led the "hectic life of a much-sought-after bachelor...His every date and dictum seem to end up in the gossip column. He had been invited to all the right parties, including Truman Capote's 'party of the century'."<sup>9</sup>

But Schlesinger had more to occupy his life than parties. On April 30, 1965, Arthur Schlesinger was in Buffalo, on a lecture tour. He received a phone call from White House staffer Bill Moyers: President Johnson had sent troops to the Dominican Republic to suppress a Communist revolution; would Schlesinger fly south and explain the intervention to Costa Rica and the rest of Central America? After being briefed by the CIA, Schlesinger decided to go. He urged that Johnson meet with Romulo Betancourt, who happened to be in Washington, D. C.; but Johnson was too

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<sup>1</sup> "Interview," *Playboy* (May 1967), 210.

<sup>2</sup> They were divorced in 1969. Soon after, he married Alexandra Emmet.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "A Professor Replies," *The Commonweal*, letters column, (Nov.1, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Mitchell Ross, Dec.3, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Kriegel, "Professors as Bonus Babies," *Commonweal*, 9-12.

<sup>6</sup> Lasky, *Myth and Man*, 303.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 406.

<sup>8</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 870-871.

<sup>9</sup> "Swinging Soothsayer," *Time* (Mar. 3, 1967), 27.

busy. Schlesinger saw Betancourt, who told him that there were no Communists in the Dominican Republic, and that Johnson was wildly over-reacting. Thinking better of the mission, Schlesinger decided not to go.<sup>10</sup>

Lyndon Johnson never swerved from his purpose though. He told an aide that allowing the liberal reformer Juan Bosch to come to power in the Dominican Republic “would be like turning it over to Arthur Schlesinger Jr.”<sup>11</sup> Robert Kennedy told Schlesinger that the invasion was an “outrage.” And Schlesinger’s old friend Stevenson said to him, “When I consider what the administration did in the Dominican Republic, I wonder if we know what we are doing in Vietnam.”<sup>12</sup> The meeting was the last time Arthur Schlesinger saw Adlai Stevenson; he died of a heart attack in London in July 1965.<sup>13</sup>

The death of Stevenson and the escalation in Vietnam marked the beginning of a new political age. The war in Vietnam and the resulting radicalization and polarization of the American political process would be crises that Stevenson’s admirers, with their faith in moderate liberalism, would find themselves unable to understand.

President Kennedy had “realized that Vietnam was his great failure in foreign policy.”<sup>14</sup> As President Johnson’s escalation policy compounded the failure, even Kennedy’s advisors began to move publicly against the war. Although Johnson, running as a peace candidate, had been able to quiet much of the opposition in 1964, the escalation that began in 1965 began to provoke protest.

The only group of influential intellectuals who had opposed the war before 1964 were those who had been opposed to the whole cold war. But as the American commitment to Vietnam increased, the majority of America’s intellectual leaders turned against the Vietnam war, led not by men from the world of power such as Schlesinger and Galbraith, but by Asian experts such as Bernard Fall and David Halberstam.<sup>15</sup> For once, the reflexive anti-American position seemed vindicated against patriotic liberalism.

At a 1965 teach-in at the White House, Schlesinger debated the historian Hans Morgenthau. Siding more with Robert Kennedy’s position than with Lyndon Johnson’s, Schlesinger defended the current American policy in Vietnam. Schlesinger argued that the 1954 commitment had been a mistake, but we could not withdraw now. He supported Lyndon Johnson and negotiation, but opposed the bombing as likely only to stiffen the will of the North Vietnamese. While Morgenthau believed that the United States should accept the inevitability of Chinese domination of the Asian mainland, Schlesinger replied that China’s swallowing of Asia was no more foreordained than was Germany’s domination of Europe three decades before.<sup>16</sup> He told the crowd, “If we took the Marines we now have in Santo Domingo and sent them to Vietnam, we’d have a better deal for both countries...What this country needs is a good night’s sleep.”<sup>17</sup>

Considering Schlesinger’s frustration with the quiet of the Eisenhower years, his call during a period of social unrest for some cooling off was more than a little ironic. Judging Lyndon Johnson too generously, Schlesinger did not realize that angry

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<sup>10</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 745-746.

<sup>11</sup> Lasky, *The Myth and the Man*, 251.

<sup>12</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 741.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *Stevenson and the World*, 862-863.

<sup>14</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 910-911.

<sup>15</sup> Kadushin, *American Intellectual Elite*, 135.

<sup>16</sup> Guenter Levy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978), 421.

<sup>17</sup> I.F. Stone, *In a Time of Torment* (New York, 1967), 234. *New York Times* (May 16, 1965), 1:3.

college students ready to destroy “the system” would pressure Johnson far more effectively than would professors looking for “a middle way.”

What made Schlesinger finally break with Johnson over Vietnam?

I guess in general a belated sense that the war made no sense at all, and that our valuable interests were not involved, and what the hell were we doing there? I should have seen it much earlier. I didn't see it until 1965.<sup>18</sup>

Becoming increasingly uncomfortable with Johnson's policy, Schlesinger helped write Robert Kennedy's February 1966 speech calling for a bombing halt and negotiations.<sup>19</sup> According to Halberstam, Schlesinger and Galbraith tried unsuccessfully to convince their old friend George Ball to resign from the Johnson administration in protest. Ball felt resignation would be ineffectual, and preferred to stay and try to influence Johnson.<sup>20</sup>

In the spring of 1966, Arthur Schlesinger, Kenneth Galbraith, and Richard Goodwin met for lunch at Quo Vadis in New York. Schlesinger remarked that if Vietnam led to a nuclear holocaust (presumably through war with China), he hoped that his last thoughts would not be that he had spent his summer at the beach. Resolved to do whatever possible, the three agreed that each would write a book about Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> “The event signaled the end of Lyndon Johnson's support among the liberal intelligentsia,” wrote one analyst.<sup>22</sup> The observation is correct if one construes “liberal” to mean “mainstream,” for the New Left had given on Johnson much earlier.

Drawing on material from magazine articles already written (a favorite Schlesinger technique) Arthur Schlesinger wrote *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1966*. The book began by arguing that, for better or worse, the United States had committed itself in Southeast Asia.<sup>23</sup> Rather than spending time in recriminations about how America had gotten involved, America should spend time figuring how to get out gracefully. Entry was a “tragedy without villains”—a convenient view for a White House advisor.<sup>24</sup> In *Commentary* few months later, he would write, “The contribution of the anti-Communist Left to the American folly in Vietnam seems to me negligible. I doubt whether the existence of the anti-Communist Left affected one way or the other the melancholy series of small official decisions, each more or less reasonable in itself, which have concluded in a vast catastrophe.”<sup>25</sup> He urged that those opposed to the war not to romanticize the Viet Cong, for their power was extended as much by fear as by hope.<sup>26</sup> As the quick assumption of power by the North Vietnamese leadership in 1974 showed, Schlesinger's observation that the war was still a civil war in the South which could not be won by pressuring the North was naïve.<sup>27</sup>

Two decades previously, in *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger had predicted that Mao Tse-Tung would follow his own path. Now Schlesinger stated that North

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<sup>18</sup> Interview 1/14/82.

<sup>19</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 829-830.

<sup>20</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 785.

<sup>21</sup> Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 484.

<sup>22</sup> Ross, *The Literary Politicians*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr. *The Bitter Heritage* (Boston, 1966), 13.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> “Liberal Anti-Communism Revisted,” *Commentary* (Sept. 1967), 70.

<sup>26</sup> Schlesinger, *The Bitter Heritage*, 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 34.

Vietnam, like North Korea, would pursue its own interests, rather than be a pawn of Chinese expansion.<sup>28</sup> Arguing against sentimental imperialism, Schlesinger dismissed the idea of building a Great Society in Asia, for Lyndon Johnson “can hardly understand the eastern seaboard of his own country; why in the world should he think he can understand the eastern seaboard of Asia?”<sup>29</sup> Using phrases he would convert into major themes in future writing, he stated, “The ultimate choice between messianism and maturity.”<sup>30</sup>

Finally, he suggested, “a middle course.” Because unilateral withdrawal would leave America with no bargaining chips, United States forces should withdraw to secure enclaves and fight a “holding action.” The enclaves could even be areas for social and political development.” Schlesinger still did not realize that American withdrawal from combat at the time was impossible because the South Vietnamese army too often lacked the will to fight.<sup>31</sup> The bombing would never win the war, Schlesinger explained, but stopping the bombing would allow the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front to save face and enter negotiations. America should pressure the current South Vietnamese regime to stop torture and to accept that a coalition government including the Viet Cong would emerge from the negotiations. The policy of escalation had failed; it was time to try something new.

Throughout the book, Schlesinger seemed to almost worry more about the war’s effects on America than on Vietnam. “The war began as a struggle for the soul Vietnam: will it end as a struggle for the soul of America?”<sup>32</sup> Fearing a resurgence of McCarthyism, he noted how Richard Nixon, spotting signs of a conspiracy, had pointed out that the name of Communist youth “DuBois sound-alike of “Boys Clubs.”<sup>33</sup> As French had in Algeria, the nation faced a test its democracy.<sup>34</sup> With even intellectuals becoming hysterical, the threats to open discussion mounted, and the longer the war lasted, the greater was the risk of national hysteria and McCarthyism.<sup>35</sup> He concluded, the “essential thing is preserve mutual trust among Americans.”<sup>36</sup> The attempt to re-unify seemingly polar elements of America would reappear during Robert Kennedy’s campaign in the attempt to unify poor whites and blacks.

By 1967, Schlesinger had lost almost all of his faith in Johnson. At an ADA news conference in March, Schlesinger charged that Johnson was not sincerely interested in negotiations.<sup>37</sup> Writing a few months later in *The New Leader*, Schlesinger detailed the assumptions behind escalation, all of which had been proven wrong. Americans were a pragmatic people, asserted Schlesinger, but President Johnson clung to a course practical experience had proven a failure.<sup>38</sup> After repeating his *Bitter Heritage* proposals, Schlesinger warned against forming an anti-war third party. Instead, anti-war activists should support anti-escalation Democrats and Republicans, and encourage both parties to turn to new leadership that favored peace, because an anti-war party would fare worse than George Wallace in the general

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 77-79.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Stone, *In a Time of Torment*.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 122.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, 126.

<sup>37</sup> “Schlesinger Charges US Wants No Peace Talks Now,” *New York Times* (Mar. 9, 1967), 1 :2

<sup>38</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Vietnam and the 1968 Election,” *The New Leader* (Nov. 6, 1967), 10.

elections.<sup>39</sup>

In *The American Intellectual Elite*, Charles Kadushin studied the influence of leading American intellectuals' effects on each others' views about Vietnam. In 1970, he found that 28 of the group he defined as the 96 most influential intellectuals had read *The Bitter Heritage*. The book was judged the eighth most influential book on Vietnam among intellectuals, and Schlesinger was ranked between sixth and eighth most influential on Vietnam.<sup>40</sup> Although Schlesinger had not begun the opposition, he had helped significantly to broaden it.

If the voice of anti-war moderates was sometimes lost in the cross-fire between Tom Hayden and General Westmoreland, Lyndon Johnson was hearing clearly. Deserted by the intellectual community as a whole, Johnson praised Walt Rostow who loyally supported Johnson and vigorous prosecution of the war: "I'm getting Rostow as my intellectual...He's not Bundy's intellectual. He's not Galbraith's intellectual. He's not Schlesinger's intellectual. He's going to be *my* goddamn intellectual, and I'm going to have him by the short hairs."<sup>41</sup> Another of Johnson's White House intellectuals, former ADA Chair John Roche, said of Schlesinger, "Power corrupts, and lack of power corrupts absolutely."<sup>42</sup>

Sadly, the Vietnam War would estrange two old friends, "Mr. Political ADA" and "Mr. ADA in the intellectual world."<sup>43</sup> Although Vice-President Humphrey privately voiced doubts about the war to Johnson, Humphrey loyally supported in public.

In April 1967, Joseph Rauh Jr. invited Humphrey, Galbraith, James Weschler, Clayton Fritchey, and Gilbert Harrison to of repair the break between Humphrey and his former liberal allies. Before Humphrey arrived, Schlesinger told the guests that Humphrey, an old deserved a polite reception. Although the evening proceeded calmly until subject of Vietnam arose, things went rapidly downhill. One participant wrote:

The bitterest debate of the evening centered on Arthur's charge that the administration stupidly failed to understand that there had been tremendous changes in the Communist world was basically clinging to the view that Communism was a monolithic structure. Humphrey took sharp issue with this, insisting that they did understand what the conflicts were about...

(Humphrey) said almost parenthetically that he thought our stand in Vietnam had been a key factor in the anti-Communist resistance in Indonesia. Arthur blew up and said, "You know damn well those generals were fighting for their lives and would have done so whether we were in Vietnam or not." When Humphrey rather defensively reaffirmed his own view, Arthur exclaimed: "Hubert that's shit and you know it."

The argument became more heated when Humphrey rhetorically asked Schlesinger if he thought he knew more about the efficacy of bombing than the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "I damn well do," replied Schlesinger. Others, including Galbraith and Fritchey took the floor for a while and pressed the case for a complete overhaul in the Department of State. The participant's memo continues:

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Kadushin, *American Intellectual Elite*, 180-188.

<sup>41</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 762.

<sup>42</sup> *Chicago Tribune* (Mar. 23, 1967), 16.

<sup>43</sup> Evans, *The Liberal Establishment*, 75.

At no point did Humphrey defend Rusk. But when Schlesinger said with some feverishness that “everybody in the State Dept. identified with Dean Rusk has got to be thrown out” ... Humphrey, for one of the few times in the evening, raised his voice and responded angrily: “Arthur, these were your guys. You were in the White House when they took over. Don’t blame them on us.” Arthur did not answer back.

At the end of the evening Schlesinger and Humphrey went out their way to part cordially, but the liberals realized that Humphrey would support Lyndon Johnson until the bitter end.<sup>44</sup>

How does Schlesinger feel about his 1967 stand in retrospect?

The position of the moderate opponents of the Vietnam war shouldn’t have been the negotiation now Ken Galbraith and I and Walter Reuther were involved in ....our argument was if we withdrew our troops, then there would be no bargaining counters for negotiation. Also none of us had any illusions about what was going to happen. A lot of opponents of the war thought it would be just fine if the Communists took over, and Vietnam would be a nice pleasant society. We did not believe that ... We thought that (it would be) a very tough society if the Communists won. We were hoping that there would be some kind of negotiation possible, and that American troops had to stay there. But in the view of what happened subsequently, I think unilateral withdrawal would have been the more sensible position in 1967.

Q. With the same results we have now.

A. But without several more years of savage war. And it might be with that the destruction less, and the anguish less, and the bitterness less, it might be a marginally better situation.<sup>45</sup>

Today Schlesinger thinks that even American success in setting up a Viet Cong-Thieu coalition government would have been a failure in the long run:

I think all that would have done is prolong the war or to ease us into a situation of sponsoring a solution resulting in takeover by the Communists. And it would have been much better just to get out entirely then, and bring at least American participation in the war to an end ... Looking back, what we should have done probably in 1963 was encourage the Diem regime to make a deal with Hanoi. I don’t think there were American interests which justified sending American troops there or getting involved in a military way.<sup>46</sup>

Schlesinger’s stand against American involvement in Vietnam was too little, too late. But in light of the brutality of the new regime, as evidenced by the massive flow refugees, one can see some merit in Arthur Schlesinger’s unwillingness to propose solution that would condemn the South Vietnamese to a government that would make even Nguyen Van Thieu look humane in comparison.

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<sup>44</sup> Albert Eisele, *Almost to the Presidency* (Blue Earth, Minnesota, 1972), 252-255. Humphrey’s diary of election day 1968 includes the thought, “That Boston bunch is bright. I can understand why John Kennedy used them. I can do without Arthur Schlesinger. Glad his books are better than his politics.” Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Interview 1/14/82.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 4/23/82.

This is a chapter from David B. Kopel, *The Highbrow in American Politics: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the Role of the Intellectual in Politics*. Honors Thesis in History, Brown University, May 1982. Awarded Highest Honors, and the National Geographic Society Prize for best History thesis. Other chapters are available on-line at <http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm>.