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Forum (44) on the Scholarship and Legacy of Leo Ribuffo

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 Introduction by Christopher Hickman, Tarleton State University

Leo Ribuffo (1945–2018) joined the George Washington University History Department in 1973. He remained a faculty member there up until his passing in November 2018. He came to be, particularly in response to his *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (1983), one of the leading historians of the American Right.¹ That book, let alone concerns about how historians are to explain American political actors and their views, serves as fodder for two of four essays in this forum about the late historian. Those essays are the work of two former students of his: Katy Hull and myself. Leo, as he preferred to be called, also devoted years of research, writing, and revision to a book on the Jimmy Carter White House. He was still at work on that book in 2018. His accounting of the 39th president and how this situates him vis-à-vis others Carter scholars serves as the focal point of two helpful essays from Carter experts Scott Kaufman and Kristin Ahlberg.

Katy Hull’s account of Leo draws upon how he had encouraged her to avoid “gee whiz” sort of thinking. He served as an outside reader on her dissertation, which has since been published as *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism* (2021).² Hull’s book is exactly the sort of work of which Leo thought so highly. Her scholarly work affords attention to an American Right that is portrayed neither as a problem to be solved nor some origin story to fashion.

My essay also gives over attention to the reception and influences of *The Old Christian Right*. It situates the late historian as an important inheritor, translator, and critic of a variety of historiographic traditions. The essay affords considerable attention to my advisor’s indebtedness to Rutgers University’s Warren Susman.

Leo’s posthumously published *The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism* (2023) is full of thoughtful assessments of one episode after another of a Carter administration that often enough could not get out of its own way. Leo provides important judgments not only about Carter as a candidate and political actor but also as a Christian thinker. The book gives readers insights about the Carter White House that situate its significance against the backdrop of American political culture since the turn of the twentieth century. Part of Carter’s oddity, Leo argues, is bound to the 39th president’s throwback worldview on politics, policy, and governance. He certainly was the most conservative Democratic Party presidential nominee since John Davis in 1924. “Despite the length of Carter’s domestic agenda,” Leo writes, “only his energy plan ranked with the most significant New Deal or Great Society actions in its potential to change American life.”³ Whatever the attempts to bolster the reputation of the Carter presidential tenure, seen for instance in Jonathan Alter’s *His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, A Life* (2020), Leo’s career-spanning interest in Jimmy Carter invites us to think about the origins and importance of our earliest assessments of that presidency.⁴

In the introduction to his *Right, Center, Left: Essays in American History* Leo sought to explain his abiding habits and interests. He considered himself keenly interested in continuity in the American past. He sought to locate it where it existed, often where it had been overlooked. Politics and governance too merited the attention of historians. This meant also that historians might even reach and communicate to persons outside of the academy. He made special note of the influence of his own surroundings. “I teach,” Leo wittingly situated

¹ Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

² Katy Hull, *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

³ Ribuffo, *The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism* (Washington, D.C.: Westphalia Press, 2023), 182.

⁴ Jonathan Alter, *His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

himself, “in Washington, D.C., where my colleagues, students, and friends pay more attention to elections than to epistemology.”⁵ Leo had been an early-career historian, living and working in the federal city throughout the Carter presidency. He had an informed spectator’s seat for the continuing erosion of what had set many of the contours for American politics and policy since the 1930s. With a mindset to mistrust earlier orthodoxies, Leo was well-positioned to put under review the earliest accounts of Carter.

Already, in election year 1980, Carter had intellectual foes who carried significant influence on the field and in setting the tone of a nascent historiography. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., held Carter in contempt. Writing in the pages of the *New Republic* in early April 1980, Schlesinger was not even willing to consider Carter of the twentieth century. He derisively noted that “[t]he reason for Carter’s horrible failure in economic policy is plain enough. On such matters he is not a Democrat—at least in anything more recent than the Grover Cleveland sense of the word.”⁶ Schlesinger supported Ted Kennedy’s insurgent efforts to wrest the nomination from the incumbent Carter. The doyen historian of cold war liberalism had set important terms of assessment even before the November general election, well before scholars could visit the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta. None of this is to say that Leo sought out different evaluations of Carter only to stand up to Schlesinger—though, this suggestion did earn his laughter the few times I mentioned this to him. It is, however, suggestive of a vital question of just how much it is even possible to dislodge the earliest of interpretations, of *any* American presidency. Be that as it may, the verdict in November 1980, when Ronald Reagan won 44 states, left Carter as a one-term president. He had faced a challenge to his own party’s nomination from Kennedy. The reputational frame of Carter was arguably set.

Ted Kennedy’s attempt to wrest the nomination from the incumbent had made appeals to part of the once stable New Deal Coalition of voters. The tragedy of the Vietnam War had chastened the country and its people. The country’s apparent meekness in the face of the ongoing hostage crisis in Iran, the confusing vortex of *détente*, and a troubled economy made Carter a vulnerable incumbent. Carter’s line about an American people, as of spring 1977, “free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear” had anchored to a human rights pivot in American foreign policy. For those differently committed to the cold war, however, such language was apostasy. William F. Buckley, Jr., appearing on the *Tonight Show* in February 1980 called upon the “inordinate fear” line to lament an administration that had apparently led the country to put away its knives vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and communism.⁷ That is, of course, not in any way the implication of the 1977 Notre Dame University speech in which the “inordinate fear” line appeared; yet, already the context had been displaced to find instead, at best, an indecisive cold war president. A month after Buckley’s jab at Carter before Johnny Carson’s audience, the *Boston Globe* ran an editorial which referred to Carter as a “wimp.” The contingencies in 1979 and 1980 pointed away from Carter’s hold on power, but perhaps that does not have to mean the inevitability of Ronald Reagan. Timothy Stanley’s *Kennedy v. Carter: The 1980 Battle for the Democratic Party’s Soul* (2010) even argues that Kennedy had more of a chance, had we won the party’s nomination, that November than our accounts have allowed. Kennedy’s version of liberalism still had its advocates. That advocacy, lest we forget, also dovetailed with the earliest, stingiest accounts of the Carter presidency.⁸

Scott Kaufman and Kristin Ahlberg both came to know Leo because of their shared interests, research, and writing on Carter. Their essays here situate Leo as not only part of scholarly revisionism on the Carter

⁵ Ribuffo, *Right, Center, Left: Essays in American History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 16-17.

⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The Great Carter Mystery,” *New Republic*, April 12, 1980.

⁷ The 12 February 1980 William F. Buckley, Jr. appearance on the *Tonight Show* is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIrQn3Tjrb4>.

⁸ Timothy Stanley, *Kennedy v. Carter: The 1980 Battle for the Democratic Party’s Soul* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 4.

presidency but also as one of the original voices in broader revisions about Carter. Pulitzer Prize winner Kai Bird's *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter* (2021) is one of the most recent counters to the original, biting assessments of Carter.⁹ Leo provided a chapter to Kaufman's authoritative 2016 collection *A Companion to Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter*. Kaufman's edited volume includes Leo's cleanest, clearest, and most concise published accounting of Carter. Writing about settled, early caricatures of Carter, Leo noted that "[n]othing is more mysterious about his presidency than the cliché that his personality and worldview were mysterious, a cliché already hardening into orthodoxy among commentators and members of Congress by the time he was inaugurated."¹⁰ Carter could never seem to catch a break.

Kaufman recounts in his essay how Leo was "one of the first people I contacted" to provide a chapter. We are fortunate that Kaufman did so. Leo's chapter bears consultation. One of the lingering questions at an April 2023 symposium on Leo at George Washington University was about his ultimate take on the Carter presidency. Readers of *The Limits of Moderation* and those who are interested in the Carter presidency might consult Leo's contribution to Kaufman's book. Ahlberg, in fact, draws from Kaufman's edited collection in her essay here. She highlights for us how with his work Leo was, in fact, encouraging us to do things differently and better when we evaluate any American president.

Kaufman's ample and important work on Carter endorses a blended assessment of the Jimmy Carter White House. He acknowledges administration successes, while reminding us that Carter's failures "left him with a far more mediocre record than might otherwise have been the case." Ahlberg's essay furthers the importance of Leo's bigger views and bigger questions about the Carter presidency. In citing the "symbolic politics" of the new president's May 1977 commencement speech at the University of Notre Dame, Ahlberg turns precisely into the territory that *The Limits of Moderation* covers in its initial chapters on Carter the candidate and the campaign in 1976. The embrace and promotion of a human-rights turn mattered to the administration. Ahlberg's extensive work on editing *Foreign Relations* volumes has underwritten such an assessment. New evidence, older evidence, and clear views of Carter, she writes, have "borne out the multi-faceted Jimmy Carter that Leo has written about."

Contributors:

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Kristin L. Ahlberg is a historian and Assistant General Editor in the Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. She has edited or co-edited 8 published volumes in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series. Ahlberg received her PhD from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2003 under the direction of Lloyd Ambrosius. She is the author of *Transplanting the Great Society: Lyndon Johnson and Food for Peace* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2008). Her chapters have appeared in books published by Oxford University Press, the University Press of Kansas, and Wiley-Blackwell. Ahlberg serves on the Executive Committee of the Agricultural History Society, the Governance Committee of the National

⁹ Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Crown, 2021).

¹⁰ Ribuffo, "Jimmy Carter, Congress, and the Supreme Court," in Scott Kaufman, ed., *A Companion to Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 381.

Council on Public History, and the Link-Kuehl Prize Committee of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. She is also a book review editor for *Agricultural History*.

Katy Hull is a Lecturer in American Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She earned her PhD in American History at Georgetown University in 2018 under the supervision of Michael Kazin. Her monograph, *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism* was published by Princeton University Press in 2021.

Scott Kaufman is a Professor of History and Board of Trustees Research Scholar at Francis Marion University. He is the author, co-author, or editor of a dozen books, including, most recently, *Ambition, Pragmatism, and Party: A Political Biography of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017) and *The Environment and International History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). He is currently working on a comparative history of the Panama and Suez canals.

“Leo Ribuffo as Carter Scholar” by Kristin L. Ahlberg, US Department of State

I had the good fortune to meet Leo Ribuffo at the beginning of my professional career in Washington.¹ Leo graciously agreed to comment on a panel I had helped arrange for the 2005 Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAHR) annual meeting that was focused on the influence and impact of electoral politics on US foreign policy. More than a decade later, at the 2016 SHAHR annual meeting, I chaired and Leo commented on a panel on the foreign policy dilemmas of the Ford and Carter administrations, featuring Barbara Keyes, Andy DeRoche, and Scott Kaufman. As Kaufman notes in his essay, this panel brought together some of the foremost and skilled chroniclers of the Carter administration, including Leo himself.

In appreciating Leo’s influence and accomplishments as a scholar, I agree with Kaufman that Leo’s writings constitute a revisionist interpretation of Jimmy Carter. This interpretation challenges some of the earlier, more orthodox assessments of Carter and his domestic and foreign policies, ones that emphasized Carter’s limitations as a leader.² Leo’s more expansive view suggests a greater complexity inherent in the 39th president. As he asserted: “Of course Carter is more complicated than the broad categories into which friends, foes, pundits, and scholars necessarily place him. The president was very smart and also, when in the mood, better able than most to view complex and/or emotional issues from a variety of perspectives, even perspectives different from his own.”³ From the vantage point of the 1976 presidential campaign, Leo claimed that Carter’s appreciation for “symbolic politics,” allowed him to deploy skillfully his background, experiences, perceptions, and accomplishments.⁴ Correctly reading the negative mood of the US public in the aftermath of Watergate, Carter positioned himself as a Washington outsider, amplifying certain aspects of his rural background, military service, and religious faith. While this was not necessarily a unique approach in the history of US political campaigns, the Democratic candidate combined this with an overwhelming desire to restore morality to the presidency.

President Carter’s early efforts to formulate his administration’s foreign policy centered upon this overarching goal. A variety of administration officials made the case that a foreign policy could be predicated upon human rights and they developed and revamped bureaucratic structures to advance this objective. The president’s embrace of symbolic politics is most evident in his May 1977 commencement address delivered at the University of Notre Dame. In its early efforts to “speak out” selectively against human rights abuses and determine how to condition US economic and military aid to a recipient’s human rights record, the Carter administration had “reaffirmed America’s commitment to human rights as a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy.”⁵ Recognition of this reality, the president conceded, “does not mean that we can conduct our foreign policy by rigid moral maxims.” In a nod to liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Carter emphasized: “We live in a world that is imperfect and which will always be imperfect—a world that is complex and confused and which will always be complex and confused.” The United States had to deal with this complex and imperfect world and not shy away from expressing support for human rights while remaining flexible in implementing

¹ The views expressed in this essay are my own and not necessarily those of the US Department of State or the US government. All sources are publicly available.

² For example, Betty Glad, *Jimmy Carter In Search of the Great White House* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980) and Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason & Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986).

³ Leo P. Ribuffo, “Jimmy Carter, Congress, and the Supreme Court,” in Scott V. Kaufman, *A Companion to Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), p. 382.

⁴ Ribuffo, “Jimmy Carter and the Selling of the President, 1976-1980,” in Herbert D. Rosenbaum and Alexej Ugrinsky, eds., *The Presidency and Domestic Politics of Jimmy Carter* (New York: ABC-CLIO, 1993), 144.

⁵ “Address by President Carter,” May 22, 1977; Kristin L. Ahlberg, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1981*, vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), Document 40.

policy. For, as the president concluded, “Our policy is based on an historical vision of America’s role. Our policy is derived from a larger view of global change. Our policy is rooted in our moral values, which never change.”

The Carter administration’s development of a rights-based foreign policy contained its own complexities and confusions. Yet as the Department of State’s Director of the Policy Planning Staff Anthony Lake acknowledged in a January 1978 briefing paper to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the administration’s human rights policy “may be the best thing this Administration has going for it. It has enormously improved America’s international standing and our claim to moral leadership. It already has done quite a lot to help individuals, in widely varying situations, and to contribute to political dynamics that can lead to future improvements.”⁶ Its pursuit, as Carter articulated in late 1978 during a ceremony commemorating the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, “is part of a broad effort to use our great power and our tremendous influence in the service of creating a better world, a world in which human beings can live in peace, in freedom, and with their basic needs adequately met.”⁷

My experience researching, compiling, and editing several *Foreign Relations* volumes in the Carter subseries certainly has borne out the multi-faceted Jimmy Carter that Leo has written about so evocatively over the years. I appreciate the effort that his students and friends have made to ensure that his last book on the Carter presidency will be published.

⁶ Undated briefing memorandum from Anthony Lake to Cyrus Vance attached to “Action Memorandum From Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Lake) to Secretary of State Vance,” January 20, 1978; Kristin L. Ahlberg ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, vol. II, Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2013), Document 105.

⁷ “Remarks by President Carter” December 6, 1978; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, vol. I, Document 101.

“Leo Ribuffo as Historical Critic” by Christopher Hickman, Tarleton State University

In 1954, the University of Kentucky Press published *Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal*, edited by Howard K. Beale.¹ Beard had engaged the academy and public audiences for a half-century. He had been at the forefront, along with his spouse and writing partner Mary, of a historiographical turn that emphasized class, material, and property interests. Beard and others in the “progressive” historiographical camp critiqued then prevalent conceptions of the American past. Until his passing in 1948, he was arguably the most influential American historian.

The Beard volume featured essays from numerous contemporary historian heavyweights. Submissions came from, among others, Merle Curti, Eric Goldman, and Richard Hofstadter.² The collection’s etiology and completion presented some complications. Beard, after all, had run afoul of available orthodoxies both of and about the 1930s and 1940s. The internationalist evolution in American policy as the country engaged a deteriorating world order in the run up to and into the Second World War had been, to Beard, iniquitous. Policymakers, military officials, those who bent Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s ear, and Roosevelt himself had done this. Beard’s views were hardly a secret. They remain readily available in his *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War 1941: A Study in Appearances and Realities* (1948).³ On matters more intrinsic to what constituted knowledge, Beard’s epistemological doubts had not made him a full-on relativist or outlier; yet, he had struggled with and attempted to think through the reliability, even the replicability, of what historians produced. Beard merited serious examination. *Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal* delivered it. To engage Beard was to engage the field.

Curti’s “Beard as Historical Critic” reckoned with the historian’s legacy. In it, he centralized Beard’s many reviews, addresses, and non-book length commentary. He could not avoid what had made Beard a controversial figure. Curti detected what many others have since: that there was identifiable continuity in Beard’s thinking.⁴ An aversion to imperialism and a hatred for the perfidy of persons in positions of political power derived from the lessons Beard had learned. Two implications were discernible in Curti’s account. For one, Beard had not been some sort of fascist fellow traveler. Second, Curti’s observations provided space for

¹ Howard K. Beale, ed., *Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954) [hereafter *Charles A. Beard*].

² Whatever their differences, on matters of foreign policy and affairs notably, Eric Goldman refused to pull his punches in his entry in the Beale volume. He did not hide his affinity for the marginalized Beard, either. At around the same time, Goldman admitted in his initial 1952 edition of *Rendezvous with Destiny* that he owed a lot to Beard. He wrote in the introduction that Beard “has been for me the reform tradition in its full grandeur.” Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1952), ix.

³ Charles Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War 1941: A Study in Appearances and Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948). Beard’s book was about more than 1941. He lamented that the warfare state and conscription were here to stay. The war had bequeathed what later would be derided as the “imperial presidency.” Beard had achieved a larger influence, in part, because of his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913). That book emphasized (or to critics then, or later, over-emphasized) the class and material interests of the document’s signatories. Nevertheless, Beard wistfully expected the Constitution to matter; he had come to worry, by the Second World War, that the document no longer restrained the war-making powers of the presidency, or even the country. His appeals for constitutional government to work well, in the United States, were also evident in his *The Republic: Conversations on Fundamentals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1943).

⁴ Curti added a new, final chapter to his revised edition of *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1951). The book, in its original iteration, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944. The new chapter, in some respects, demanded that Beard get a pass for any apostasy. One of Curti’s judgments was that advocacy and ideas had been boxed in as of late. Much of this had restricted discussions of “foreign relations.” Moreover, there had been, he wrote, a “retreat of the critical attitude toward American life and values which had marked the nineteen-twenties and ‘thirties.” On this see Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 753.

those who had been critical of Beard to give back some of his dignity. Mary Ritter Beard in her *The Making of Charles Beard* (1955) provided key insights on the genealogy of her late husband's thinking. While they were both undergraduates at Depauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, her future husband had traveled to Chicago to visit Hull House. He had also fondly taken to William Jennings Bryan. Bryan had, in the 1896 US presidential election, secured the nomination of both the Democratic Party and the upstart, if short-lived, People's Party. Bryan's defeat did not remove him from the field of American politics and public debate. He fell short of the White House again after he secured the Democratic Party's nomination in 1900 and 1908. Importantly, Bryan also stood up as one of the more prominent critical voices during the fin-de-siècle confusion and debates that attended to and followed the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War. "Bryan's anti-imperialism," she wrote, "took roots in Beard's soul."⁵

Having explained, though not explained away, Beard's controversial accounting of the United States and the Second World War, Curti got to work on Beard's influence and lasting traits. Beard's reviews and non-book length writings demonstrated a persistent "satire," which had been both playful and central to his efforts. Beard's writings demonstrated a remarkable "catholicity...[in his] interests." Curti observed that Beard "saw no magic in the mere use of new materials," unless such use "compelled a revision of established views." Finally, he had demonstrated an abiding "concern for [the] definition of terms and their precise use."⁶

In important ways, Beard, Curti, Goldman, and Hofstadter all connected to the work and thought of the late historian Leo Ribuffo (1945–2018). Rutgers University's Warren Susman also had an indelible influence on Leo. Whether Leo — as he preferred to be called — had a marked-up copy of *Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal* somewhere is unknown. Given the size and ostensible disorder of his home library shelves and university office library, both of which overflowed with books, locating any book would have been a lot to ask of a skilled crime-scene investigator. If Leo did have a personal copy, the inscrutability of his handwriting would have likely made the task of figuring out what he thought, as available in his marginalia, the sort of task that only a colleague, close friend, or former graduate advisee of his could conceivably manage. Leo's handwriting aside, his mordant wit, capacious interests, conviction that the newer evidence (or entire books) were to provide necessary revisions, and an insistence on interrogating the terms we employ as we examine the past were as central to Leo as Curti argued they had been to Beard.

Leo also sought, when warranted, to challenge orthodoxies; he extolled those historians and intellectuals, and marveled at them in fact, when they did so. He owned up to and sought to account for circumstances when he changed his mind or swam along with the tide. As a case in point, Leo supported the United States' invasion of Afghanistan that began in October 2001. He admitted early on that this had been "the first American military intervention I have favored in my adult life."⁷ As someone who had gathered his intellectual bearings during the contested 1960s, Leo provided his endorsement in a manner that fit to at least some of that era's guidance. Leo often drew inspiration from Reinhold Niebuhr, which prompted Leo to account for notable ironies and perils that fit to a country at war. He took guidance also from the inimitable William Appleman Williams. Williams, in his preface to *The Contours of American History*, had extolled what he labeled "history as a way of learning."⁸ Leo thought much of that supple conception. Accordingly, Leo wrote

⁵ Mary Ritter Beard, *The Making of Charles Beard* (New York: Exposition Press, 1955), 15; for further elaboration on Beard's continuities on matters of war, imperialism, and American power see, broadly, Ellen Nore, *Charles A. Beard: An Intellectual Biography* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).

⁶ Merle Curti, "Beard as Historical Critic," in *Charles A. Beard*, 185-212, (quoted language at 187, 188, 189, and 191).

⁷ Leo Ribuffo, "One Cheer for this Military Intervention, Two Cheers for Cosmopolitan Isolationism," *The Journal of the Historical Society* II: 2 (Spring 2002): 203-214 (quote at 203), DOI: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1540-5923.22016>

⁸ William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966).

that the use of American military power ought “not authorize a moratorium on thinking about past, present, and future foreign policy, along with its domestic causes and consequences.”⁹ He worried that the contextual past would get displaced. Time proved Leo to have been correct.

A longer past, also, was there to remind us that smugness, poor choices, and blindness had been hallmarks of prevailing American thought and actions toward the rest of the world. Scathingly, he imagined that “American officials at all levels probably would have taken [al-Qaeda leader Osama] bin Laden’s capacity to attack the United States more seriously had he been a white European, much as the vulnerability of Hawaii and the Philippines would have seemed obvious if Germany rather than Japan had been the enemy in the Pacific.”¹⁰ The recognition of continuities mattered as the United States sought to hold to account those responsible for the attacks on 11 September 2001.

Leo’s contributions as a “historical critic” merit a sizable place in an account of his lengthy academic career at George Washington University (GW) and within the profession.¹¹ At a symposium on Leo’s scholarship and career held at GW this past April, one of the panelists, historian David Patrick Walsh, suggested that Leo’s scholarship had been more influential than that of Richard Hofstadter. Walsh’s comment fairly extends from the significant reach of Leo’s first book: *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (1983).¹² We might build out from Walsh’s acknowledgment, however, to detect in Leo’s decades-long career his uncanny sensitivity to and awareness of historiography. He was an expert on the American presidency, the life and presidency of James Earl Carter, religion broadly across the American experience, intellectual history, American political history, and the history of American foreign relations. He had come to have a prominent place as a sort of historian-scold, particularly since his article “Why is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About it” from the spring 1994 issue of the *American Historical Review*.¹³ That designation—as a scold—he took to with aplomb. He wrote, for instance, in 2003 that “with rare exceptions, participants in the current scholarly rediscovery of conservatism begin the story roughly 160 years too late.”¹⁴ His volley against a bevy of books, many of which focused on the second half of the twentieth century, was more than mere curmudgeonly dismissal. His perennial criticisms were reminders that conservative terms, methods, structures, ideas, and

⁹ Ribuffo, “One Cheer for this Military Intervention, Two Cheers for Cosmopolitan Isolationism,” 203.

¹⁰ Ribuffo, “One Cheer for this Military Intervention, Two Cheers for Cosmopolitan Isolationism,” 205.

¹¹ Michael Kazin delivered the keynote address at the 21 April 2023 event at GW: “The Irony of An American Historian: A Symposium Remembering Leo Ribuffo.” (A recording of the day-long event from April 2023 is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5pYZKTp1Oo>.) Sessions on Leo’s canonical *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983) and another on his recently published *The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism* (Washington, DC: Westphalia Press, 2023) bookended Kazin’s keynote. In Kazin’s comments, he focused on Leo’s many essays, reviews, and conference presentations. He centered Leo as one of the best critics of the profession. Leo’s critical remarks came over in pieces for *Dissent*, more substantial reviews and essays in the pages of *Reviews in American History*, the *Pacific Historical Review*, *Diplomatic History*, the *Journal of Southern History* and online for the History News Network and *H-Diplo*. He contributed frequently to the short-lived but often fascinating *Historically Speaking*. A smattering of his early in his career essays in *American Quarterly*, most of which he had revised, appeared in a 1992 collection. For that book see Ribuffo, *Right, Center, Left: Essays in American History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

¹² Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

¹³ Ribuffo, “Why Is There so Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about It.” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 438–49, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2167283>.

¹⁴ Ribuffo, “Conservatism and American Politics,” *The Journal of the Historical Society* III: 2 (Spring 2003), 163-175 (quote at 164), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5923.00053>.

persons had always had a meaningful, if not controlling, presence in American history. Conservatism had been what mattered well before the debut of *National Review* in 1955.

Leo spent one year at Bucknell University before he joined the faculty at GW in 1973. He remained at GW until his passing forty-five years later. He brought with him to GW the influences of a variety of mentors and friends from his studies, first as an undergraduate at Rutgers University (RU) and later as a graduate student at Yale. From Warren Susman, a cherished historian-teacher from Leo's undergraduate setting, Leo had recognized an almost impossible to emulate generosity.¹⁵ He tried all the same. Speaking about Susman at a 1985 Rutgers University Symposium on the late historian, Leo recounted that he had "first met Warren face-to-face in late 1964 when I meekly asked for an extension on a paper for his course in American intellectual history." Leo told the audience that he had been "scared to death" to ask for an extension. True to an apparent custom, Susman granted that extension. "Papers might be weeks late without eliciting retribution," Leo relayed, "but heaven help the student who happened to approve of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr's interpretations of the 1930s."¹⁶ Leo's fierce devotion to and interest in GW graduate students manifested itself time and again. His seminars always seemed to be the most talked about, if not directly influential on an array of dissertations. He always seemed to have an awareness of works-in-progress, even for students whose dissertations he did not direct. Warranted or not, he always made the time to take an interest in and inquire about our work as if we were the experts on something. It would take more than divine help, however, to shield us from his scolding were we to find something estimable in the parlor game of ranking the American presidents or, worse still, in the "vital-center" that Schlesinger, Jr., and much of mid-twentieth century American liberalism favored.¹⁷

One might go too far in insisting these habits were but an imitation of a cherished mentor from the 1960s. Leo always wanted people to have an unmerciful honesty about their influences. His lectures to undergraduates contained implicit nods to Susman, notably illustrations and themes from Susman's *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1984).¹⁸ Leo's lectures held the attention of most undergraduates; Susman, by all accounts, had done the same. Leo's long-time colleague Edward Berkowitz noted to the GW school newspaper that Leo's lectures demonstrated "kind of a lost art these days."¹⁹ Part of the "lost art" was bound up in the stentorian presence Leo had before the classroom. Leo did not, as far as I know, imitate Susman's apparent willingness to break into song in front of students. Leo certainly knew that his voice would have been no rival for that of Mario Lanza.²⁰ One of his more personal lectures he delivered to the American History survey course involved the small, but consequential, red scare at his high school in 1960. His parting recollection in the lecture was about the damage his red-baiting schoolmates had caused. Their actions and allegations had, as he put it, "ruined lives." That is a dark message to take to a captive audience of students, most of whom were only a few years out of high school. Lectures, in both the second half of the American history survey class and his course on American history since 1941,

¹⁵ Rutgers University has had a graduate student conference named after Susman for over four decades. Leo did his part, though, to ensure that Susman thrived and reached students well beyond his mentor's passing. In 2019 The Society for U.S. Intellectual History established a yearly award for the best dissertation in U.S. Intellectual History. To its credit the organization named the award after Leo.

¹⁶ Ribuffo, "A Teacher of Undergraduates" in *In Memory of Warren I. Susman, 1927-1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 28-33 (quote at 30).

¹⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949).

¹⁸ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

¹⁹ Edward Berkowitz quoted in "Leo Ribuffo, Longtime History Professor, Dies at 73," *GW Hatchet*, 3 December 2018, 5.

²⁰ Leo had some fondness for the music of Mario Lanza, surely one of the most popular Italian-American entertainers of the 1950s.

offered students a mix of important historiographical squabbles and Leo's pointed evaluations of the American past. History, in a large lecture hall no less, was a way of learning.

Leo often associated ideology with cultural and political elites in the lecture material. Some of those elite actors did merit the attention anyway. He was careful enough to suggest to students, however, that his way of presenting the material was not meant to crowd out complementary or different approaches. American interactions with the rest of the world merited considerable space. Books, sermons, editorials, and speeches inserted in the *Congressional Record* provided access to Protestant expansionism, militarist thinking, and real-time elaborations on the importance of commercial access to other markets in the decades after the American Civil War. Across any number of lectures, he gave over substantial time to power, empire and its consequences, modernization thinking, the persistent Wilsonian cast of American nationalism and projections of its influence, the Food for Peace program, the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress—in short, hallmarks for assessing the ideas and presumptions often at the core of American engagement with the world. Other lectures, on everything from moments of potential contingency in the cold war before *détente* to the blunt application of American military force in the twenty-first century, came to centralizing, sometimes under-addressed, ideas. There were always consequences, unanticipated ones too. The lectures were practically public service announcements, in essence warnings given the profile of a sufficient number of GW undergraduates. Enough of them might later seek out positions at the United States Agency for International Development or the World Bank, both of which were for some time headquartered a manageable walk from campus. The lectures served as a prefatory pinprick to what such ambitions entailed. Empire just kept on in American life. What accounted for that persistence continued to be worth thinking about. Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne's edited volume *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories* (2022) has one entry after another that merit a large readership, at least in part, precisely because of that persistence.²¹ Leo's lectures also did this, packaged neatly in seventy to seventy-five minutes.

Work that Leo completed for Susman on an undergraduate thesis about Lawrence Dennis presaged career-long interests. Dennis was a one-time diplomat who became one of the more prominent voices of an American fascism of the 1930s.²² He was also indicted in 1944. A refuge of sorts from the Jim Crow south, his *The Coming of American Fascism* (1936) spelled out what Americans could expect.²³ Fascism, to Dennis, seemed a likely future. An “ideal fascism,” he wrote, “would be one which has honestly and truthfully been presented to the people during its struggle for power.”²⁴ The fascism Dennis identified would actively subordinate women to men, and women to some larger public interest. He spelled out, for instance, that any work setting that featured jobs involving the public interest would be subject to state control. Unless absolutely in the public interest, women were simply not going to have any job that a man could fill instead.²⁵ The fascist knew that the nation always came first. “[T]he defense and best interests of his own land,” he alerted his readers, “do not require it to become involved in every war that occurs.” In contrast, any

²¹ Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). Also see the H-Diplo/RJISSF review, Adam Quinn, “Review Essay 77: Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories*,” H-Diplo, 21 September 2023, <https://issforum.org/ISSF//RE77.pdf>.

²² For an argument that situates Dennis as an intellectual godfather of the New Left see Justus D. Doenecke, “Lawrence Dennis: Revisionist of the Cold War,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 55, no. 4 (1972): 275–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4634739>.

²³ Lawrence Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism* (New York: Harper, 1936). Gerald Horne explores how Dennis “passed” as a white man, and how that passing choice and Jim Crow anchored to his advocacy of fascism. Gerald Horne, *The Color of Fascism: Lawrence Dennis, Racial Passing, and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

²⁴ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, ix.

²⁵ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 258-269, here 264.

“internationalist...must try to draw his country into every war that breaks out.”²⁶ Dennis’s fascist state also would get rid of legal arguments and appeals that situated or permitted individual liberties as rivals to what the state deemed in the public interest. “The property owner,” Dennis warned as much as he foretold, “or corporate management which contested a new law or government measure would not be allowed to advance any arguments asserting a private right as superior to the right of the state.”²⁷

Dennis fit within a larger culture of ideas that had not settled on what the future held. The future he seemed to foretell was not the future, or present, that others endorsed. So much within the 1930s seemed at stake. Lest we overlook it, intellectual opponents of an American fascism turned to expressed concerns over parts of the New Deal. As John Patrick Diggins wrote, the attack on the New Deal as “a bastard of the Corporate state...[was] a polemic hurled by both the Left and the Right in the thirties.”²⁸ Both the failures caused by the Great Depression and the programs meant to arrest those failures were, plausibly, vectors to a fascist American future. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was a visible, early New Deal program that, to some observers, seemed to augur national planning. Near the close of its 1934 term, the Supreme Court ruled the program and the legislation that fashioned it did not square with the Constitution. Yet, even before that May 1935 decision some thoughtful contemporaries worried less that the NRA would fail to help the moribund American economy, and more that it would assist fascism at home. Carmen Haider’s *Do We Want Fascism* (1934) was one such contemporary source of this unease.²⁹ Haider’s premonitions about the NRA fit to other concerns. For instance, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) work program was one of Roosevelt’s favorite New Deal ventures; unlike the NRA, the CCC survived the 1930s. Haider, however, expressed a viewpoint that the CCC might evolve into something similar to what she had observed in Germany. She even suggested that *Common Sense*, the Left-oriented journal published by Alfred Bingham and Selden Rodman, to which Charles Beard contributed we might note, could at some point turn to the Right. Amidst the misery of the Great Depression, a variety of voices issued, as she put it, a “demand for a strong state.”³⁰

Later vital-center and pluralist thinkers identified and venerated some version of a plausible and workable American state. Interests, organizations, and even political parties were supposed to work things out. But these ideas about how an abiding American governance functions only seem quaint when we push aside the homegrown advocates of and worries about an inordinate state power of the 1930s. V.O. Key, Jr., likely is no longer included on must-read lists for American historians, but his descriptive and prescriptive work about how American politics and governance functioned at mid-century was responsive to the 1930s. *Parties, Politics, and Pressure Groups* (1942) argued that larger patterns, associations, and requests found expression within pressure groups or political parties.³¹ Two decades before, Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922) had situated most persons as unworthy of contributions to governance.³² By the early Cold War, however, Wilfred Binkley and Malcolm Moos’s *A Grammar of American Politics: The National Government* (1949) hardly made the electorate or voters out to be distinguished or supremely rational, but did suggest that the pluralist, broker-state process would somehow clean away the worst possible outcomes.³³ When the worst, or what enough of the interests deemed the worst, did come to pass, this was supposed to be a rarity; respect for rules and the Constitution would ensure that developments such as the viciously anti-organized labor legislation of the 80th

²⁶ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 282-283.

²⁷ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 157-158.

²⁸ John Patrick Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton University Press, 1972), 280.

²⁹ Carmen Haider, *Do We Want Fascism* (New York: The John Day Company, 1934).

³⁰ Haider, *Do We Want Fascism*, 221-255, here 241.

³¹ V.O. Key, Jr., *Parties, Politics, and Pressure Groups* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1942).

³² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927) [1922].

³³ Wilfred Binkley and Malcolm Moos, *A Grammar of American Politics: The National Government* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

Congress were infrequent.³⁴ Whether or not this was a work-around or a genuine principle mattered then. It likely just did not matter enough to prevent Congress from passing the draconian Communist Control Act of 1954. Cold war priorities and the lessons of one available recent past meant that fascism and communism counseled resistance to these twin totalitarian evils. Broker-state politics and policy, in the United States, was supposed to ward off extremes.

Be this as it may, whether from the vantage point of the mid-1960s, when Leo got to work on Dennis and the American Right, or 2023, when the American Conservative Union's Conservative Political Action Conference held its annual gathering in Budapest, the study of an American far right remains urgent. Leo though began his study when the extremes in American politics were often subject to pious derision or ignored all together. Intellectuals often found or articulated agreement with the way things were. Culture promoted and protected these accounts, too. Look no further than Raymond Massey's portrayal of abolitionist John Brown in the film *Seven Angry Men* (1955). Brown and his collaborators, in October 1859, briefly captured the arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Massey's filmic Brown was not a terrorist; he was not on the right or wrong side of history, either. The film depicts him as a God-fearing lunatic.

Leo continued to research and write about the American far Right of the 1930s and 1940s. He did so in his Yale doctoral dissertation. That dissertation later came to readers as *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (1983). The struggle to get it published mattered to Leo at least as much as the book's reception and influence. Who could blame him? The book, nonetheless, received the Merle Curti Award in 1985 from the Organization of American Historians for the best book in intellectual and/or social history.³⁵ Its influence has been profound. As Curti had written about Beard's high expectations for scholarly work, *The Old Christian Right* soon "compelled a revision of established views."

The Old Christian Right examined a trio of individuals whose activities and ideas overlay United States history from the interwar years through the early Cold War: William Dudley Pelley, Gerald L.K. Smith, and Gerald B. Winrod. Pelley oversaw the Silver Legion (or "Silver Shirts"), which he started not long after Hitler had become chancellor of Germany in January 1933. Spiritual sanction stood behind Pelley's advocacy and actions—or so he believed. He claimed to have been in direct communication with Jesus Christ. Smith also had a prominent role in American demagoguery of the 1930s. He skillfully used the radio and packed auditoriums to express not only dissatisfaction with Roosevelt but also a transparent hatred for Jewry.³⁶ Winrod fit a variety of anti-Semitic conspiracies to Protestant fundamentalism and a prophetic Bible. And during the 1930s, he took to critiques of the New Deal and Roosevelt that centered the administration as doing the bidding of Jewish conspirators. The only way to stay on course was for the country and its people to be a Protestant Christian nation. Parts of Winrod's worldview had been operant in some American Protestant circles since the seventeenth century.

Mark Noll's review in the *Journal of American History* judged *The Old Christian Right* successful, in no small part, because it had accorded these three hard-to-tolerate characters serious study. They emerged "as complex historical actors" as Noll put it. The attention to their ideas and advocacy revealed "the essential continuities between their Christian nationalism, economic distributionism, and conspiratorial anti-Semitism and main

³⁴ On their blasé account of the destructive Taft-Hartley bill see Binkley and Moos, *A Grammar of American Politics*, 151.

³⁵ For a list of other winners of this award see: <https://www.oah.org/awards/book-awards/merle-curti-award/winners/>.

³⁶ For background on Smith see Glen Jeansonne, "Gerald L.K. Smith: From Wisconsin Roots to National Notoriety," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 86, no. 2 (2002-2003), 18-29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4637024>.

currents of American culture.”³⁷ They were at once representatives of a maligned far right, and yet understudied and under-appreciated for what they could demonstrate about what the extremes and non-extreme meant.

Leonard Dinnerstein’s *American Historical Review* assessment noted that the ideas of Leo’s trio “developed out of culturally accepted norms.” The review concluded that “scholars of Fundamentalists in politics and the Christian right-wing... will ignore Ribuffo’s arguments at their peril.”³⁸ Nearly a decade later, Geoffrey Smith, in his revised edition of *To Save a Nation: American Extremism, the New Deal and the Coming of World War II* expressed an indebtedness to *The Old Christian Right*. Leo’s work, Smith wrote in his updated endnotes, “exhibits uncommon historical empathy and raises many good questions about the influences of current events upon intellectual attitudes.” The book had become “the starting reference point for anyone who would understand ‘extremism’ from the late 1920s onward.”³⁹ This was considerable praise, particularly because Smith admitted that Leo had subjected Smith’s original version of the book to withering criticism almost two decades before in the pages of *American Quarterly*.⁴⁰

Our indebtedness to Leo persists. In a recent *Journal of American History* essay, Kim Phillips-Fein contended that *That the Old Christian Right* underplayed the prospects of a far right, including actors such as Gerald Winrod, to gain political power. Be that as it may, Fein tells us that “Ribuffo’s work anticipates much of the contemporary scholarship on the far Right.”⁴¹ Fein’s piece detects not the pathological absurdity of Winrod, but substantial opportunity for extreme actors to influence politics and debate. Leo did likewise. He took seriously the work of the Dies Committee and J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation to investigate, expose, and even lay the groundwork for prosecution of homegrown fascists. Later on, that groundwork allowed parts of the American right, if not a centrist directed American polity, to turn against milder parts of the American left. The 1930s continued with their parlous influence. Into the early Cold War, US Senators Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) and William Jenner (R-IN), conservative activists Fred and Phyllis Schlafly, and Rosalie Gordon, the author of a much-circulated screed against the mid-twentieth century Supreme Court, *Nine Men Against America* (1958), were all involved with settling older accounts and calling for a broader state and public to isolate and harass out of existence some other alleged extreme.⁴² The 1930s and the Second World War era were not just available for us to find misfits who offered later observers a historical stress-test to determine how much extremism the country might allow. The 1930s explained the world at least as much as the new dangers and stressors brought about by the Cold War.

³⁷ Mark Noll, “The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War Leo P. Ribuffo,” *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 1 (June 1, 1984): 164–65, here 165, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1899904>.

³⁸ Leonard Dinnerstein, *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (1984): 1185–1186, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1866600>.

³⁹ Geoffrey Smith, *To Save a Nation: American Extremism, the New Deal and the Coming of World War II* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992), 211.

⁴⁰ Leo’s critique appeared as “Fascists, Nazis, and American Minds: Perceptions and Preconceptions,” *American Quarterly* XXVI (October 1974), 417–433.

⁴¹ Kim Phillips-Fein, “A Fight Between Two Systems of Thought: Gerald P. Winrod and the Kansas Senate Race of 1938,” *Journal of American History* 108, no. 3 (2021): 521–544, here 524, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaab231>.

⁴² Rosalie Gordon’s ideas circulated in 1957 in pamphlet form and in excerpts. Those are scattered throughout archival collections. But the 1958 version is its first iteration as a published book. Rosalie Gordon, *Nine Men Against America* (New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1958).

John S. Huntington's *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (2021) is a recent entry that persists in conversation that harken back to *The Old Christian Right*.⁴³ An indebtedness to Leo abounds in *Far-Right Vanguard's* earlier chapters and endnotes. Beverly Gage's *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (2022) rightfully impressed readers and the Pulitzer Prize Board members with its authoritative account of Hoover.⁴⁴ Hoover (and the FBI) benefited from Roosevelt's directives to the agency that subversion, from the left and right, warranted surveillance. An increased attentiveness to fascism at home dated from 1933 but picked up in 1936. As Gage writes, however, by "the summer of 1936, 'fascist' was among the most widely deployed epithets in American politics. Its boundaries, though, were far from self-evident."⁴⁵ Leo's work demanded serious thought about those boundaries. Bruce Kuklick, who has known Leo since their graduate work at Yale, recently provided us with *Fascism Comes to America: A Century of Obsession in American Politics* (2022).⁴⁶ Fascism, in Kuklick's book, defies delineation. He argues that those who use the term are responsible for that failed delineation. It has been one of the most persistent, as Kuklick put it, "shock words of the twentieth century."⁴⁷

Not even six months into the presidential tenure of Donald Trump, Leo reminded us to be careful with how we call upon Richard Hofstadter. For *H-Diplo* and then in an edited volume he provided us with "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style' in American (Intellectual) Politics."⁴⁸ As I corresponded with Leo about the piece, then in its earlier stages that April, he worried that the term, "shibboleth that it is" would persist in one invocation after another.⁴⁹ He reminded me then, as he does readers of the final essay, that he had tried in vain to wean historians, if not others, off the phrase.⁵⁰ Leo, in a thoughtful account of the mid-twentieth century pluralist thinkers, knew the phrase would continue to appear. But if the phrase lingered at least the thinking could be nudged along to other conclusions. He wrote: "Commentators—including some historians who should know better—still routinely present essentially admirable and relatively tolerant figures like William Jennings Bryan and Huey Long as Trump's precursors."⁵¹ When we met up not long before the essay appeared, I wanted to ask him something about his own style, his repetitions. Had his script about the American political spectrum since the late nineteenth century or 1930s, his supple inclusion of bigots, cranks, oddballs, and conspiracists into what was essential to the American past, or his thoughtful inclusion of ideational and cultural matters, often at just the right juncture, mattered? Had at least some, or many, of his efforts to get James Earl Carter's presidential tenure thought of differently been part of scholarly corrections? As I walked from the Columbia Heights metro station to meet him at one of his favorite spots, the Marx Café, I realized I need not ask. He kept at it not because of some intellectual habit that he could not break.

⁴³ John Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2021).

⁴⁴ Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Viking, 2022).

⁴⁵ Gage, *G-Man*, 204-216, here 207.

⁴⁶ Bruce Kuklick, *Fascism Comes to America: A Century of Obsession in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

⁴⁷ Kuklick, *Fascism Comes to America*, 193.

⁴⁸ Ribuffo, "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style' in American (Intellectual) Politics," *H-Diplo* (June 13, 2017); <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AN.pdf>; and Ribuffo, "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style' in American (Intellectual) Politics," in Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 343-62.

⁴⁹ Ribuffo, Email to author, 10 April 2017.

⁵⁰ For some evidence that the term, let alone the thinking or un-thinking it promotes, is losing fans see Jesse Robertson, "Richard Hofstadter's 'The Paranoid Style' Can't Help us Now," *Jacobin* (July 19, 2023), <https://jacobin.com/2023/07/richard-hofstadter-paranoid-style-conspiracies-history-class>.

⁵¹ Ribuffo, "Donald Trump and the 'Paranoid Style' in American (Intellectual) Politics," 7, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AN.pdf>.

Leo kept at it because he knew that to be part of the historian's guild was to challenge his peers. The field is better because of it.

“Fascism in America? Don’t Act Surprised!” by Katy Hull, University of Amsterdam

If my memory serves me, Leo Ribuffo gave me a single piece of advice when I was writing my dissertation on American sympathies with Italian fascism. He told me (repeatedly) to avoid any sense of “gee whiz.” From what I understood, “gee whiz” could result in three iterations of bad history. First, where “gee whiz” was an expression of self-congratulation (“look what I found!”), it would overstate my originality, suggesting that I had discovered something that other historians had never shown before. Second, when “gee whiz” indicated perplexity (“well, isn’t that strange?”), it would imply that fascist sympathies could not be explained by contemporaneous social, cultural, and political developments. And, third, where “gee whiz” connoted shock (“that’s awful!”), it would offer moral opprobrium as an inadequate substitute for analysis. Leo’s admonition to avoid “gee whiz” encouraged me to draw connections between extremist thought and mainstream institutions, ideas, and anxieties. And, although his verbal advice was succinct, his book—*The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War*—offered plenty of inspiration for how I might proceed.

In *The Old Christian Right*, Leo argued that “the ‘extremism’ of the far right often converged with the cultural and political mainstream.”¹ He explained why William Dudley Pelley (a spiritualist who headed the Nazi-inspired Silver Legion), Gerald B. Winrod (founder of the fundamentalist organization, Defenders of the Christian Faith), and Gerald L.K. Smith (a preacher and populist politician) embraced conspiratorial anti-Semitism and opposed interventions to defeat Nazi Germany. Leo reminded us that the United States was “an overwhelmingly nativist nation” in the early twentieth century; even “polite” society excluded Jews from universities, social clubs, and professions.² Meanwhile, many Americans turned a blind eye to Nazi violence: the *Saturday Evening Post* (the magazine of middle America) welcomed Nazi leader Hitler’s rise to power; and, well into the mid-decade, American entrepreneurs continued to do business with the Third Reich.³ Rejecting over-simplified invocations of Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid style,” Leo argued that Pelley, Smith, and Winrod’s beliefs were not a consequence of religious fundamentalism or mental illness.⁴ Instead, they were the product of rational calculations, based on their absorption of distasteful (but prevalent) elements of American culture.

Leo’s observations about continuities between mainstream and extreme perspectives encouraged me to investigate sympathies for Italian fascism at the center of American life. The four individuals whom I profiled had ties to establishment politics, media, and academia. Richard Washburn Child was the US ambassador to Italy during the Harding administration and a prolific writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Anne O’Hare McCormick was a journalist for the *New York Times*, and the first woman to serve on the *Times*’ editorial board. Generoso Pope was the publisher of the United States’ preeminent Italian-language newspaper, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, and an important Democratic Party powerbroker. Herbert Wallace Schneider was a professor at Columbia University and a protégé of the moral philosopher, John Dewey.

¹ Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), xii.

² Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* 243–44, 9.

³ Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* 20.

⁴ Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* 15–16, 238–49. Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s*, November 1964.

Of course, had I only shown that fascist sympathizers were present in august institutions in the United States, I would have produced the kind of “gee whiz” history that Leo warned me not to write.⁵ Instead, following his example, I aimed to show how fascist sympathizers riffed on themes that circulated in the “dominant culture.”⁶ For example, when Child praised Italy’s Duce Benito Mussolini as a “patriot,” who molded “the plastic material of chaos” into a strong state, he echoed the State Department and *Post*’s admiration for anti-Bolshevik strongmen.⁷ And when Schneider described the fascist corporate state as “up-to-date,” he keyed into political scientists’ concerns that the American system of representative democracy was obsolete.⁸ McCormick’s admiration for the fascist program of land reclamation intersected with a widespread “back to the land” movement, which romanticized rural lifestyles in the depression years.⁹ And Pope’s characterization of fascism as a product of Italian ingenuity was a rejoinder to nativist stereotypes of southern European immigrants as irredeemably anti-modern.¹⁰ Through these examples and others, I investigated how Child, Schneider, McCormick, and Pope used pro-fascist discourses to stake out positions within mainstream debates on democratic dysfunction, economic reform, and immigration. Much as Leo had done, I suggested that fascist sympathies were woven into the texture of American foreign policy, culture, and social thought.

While *The Old Christian Right* deserves to be read from cover to cover, I would point those whose time is limited to the introduction, which Leo titled “‘Extremism’ and Empathy.”¹¹ He put extremism in quotation marks to signal that the word itself was problematic. By fencing off the likes of Pelley, Smith, and Winrod, labels such as “extremist,” and “radical right,” “obscure[d] the sources of indecency,” he argued.¹² Contextualizing the prejudice and narrow-mindedness of far-right individuals, Leo encouraged us to examine American culture and politics writ large. The second half of the introductory title—“Empathy”—spoke to the kind of historian (and person) he was. From Pelley’s advocacy of Jewish ghettos on American soil, to Winrod’s suggestion that President Franklin Roosevelt was no less a dictator than Adolf Hitler, to Smith’s proposal for the expatriation of black US citizens to Africa, Leo aimed to make the most outrageous notions comprehensible.¹³ His intention was not to normalize the reprehensible, but to prompt us to see the connective tissue between appalling ideas and the complacent attitudes and questionable policies of mainline thinkers and politicians. I suspect that my book—published three years after he died—would still contain too much “gee whiz” for Leo’s taste. It is not easy to write the kind of history he wrote. The best historians do not sling mud. Instead, they make us all feel a little bit dirty.

⁵ There was nothing revelatory in my observation that Child, McCormick, Pope, and Schneider sympathized with fascism. John Diggins’ work on this subject was foundational to my own. John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

⁶ Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, 244–46.

⁷ Richard Washburn Child, “What Does Mussolini Mean?” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 26, 1924.

⁸ Herbert Wallace Schneider, *Making the Fascist State* (New York: H. Fertig, 1928), 112; Katy Hull, *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 65–83.

⁹ Hull, *Machine Has a Soul*, 96–102.

¹⁰ Hull, *Machine Has a Soul*, 46–48.

¹¹ Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, xi–ix.

¹² Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* xviii, xiii.

¹³ Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* 70, 102, 165.

“Leo and Me: A Tale of Two Carters” by Scott Kaufman, Francis Marion University

In 2016, I was a participant for a panel on the Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter administrations at the annual Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) conference. Presenting as well were Andy DeRoche of Front Range Community College and Leo Ribuffo, the latter of whom delivered a paper on President Carter and the US arms embargo against Turkey. I vividly remember Leo telling the audience after the presentations that on that panel were three of the world’s top Carter scholars. It was a shock to me have a person of Leo’s stature say that. There were so many others who had written on Carter or members of his administration, Andy DeRoche, Gaddis Smith, Burton Kaufman (yes, there is a relation!), Douglas Brinkley, Betty Glad, and John Dumbrell, to name just a few;¹ to be added to that list was to me an honor. Sadly, it was the last time I saw Leo prior to his passing.

Certainly I did not know Leo as well as his students or colleagues did. It was our common interest in the Carter administration that drew us together. Indeed, I believe it was at the Jimmy Carter Library that I first met Leo. In addition to the above-mentioned meeting, he served as chair for a SHAFR conference panel I put together in 2000, and he asked me to take part in a roundtable he arranged for the Organization of American Historians’ annual meeting in 2014. When I was approached about compiling and editing a series of historiographical essays on Ford and Carter, one of the first people I contacted was Leo, who contributed a superb piece on the relationship between the 39th president on the one hand, and Congress and the Supreme Court on the other.²

Leo was insatiably curious, very personable, funny, and witty. (Based on what others have written about him, it is his wit that seems to stand out the most.) He knew how to offer criticism in a way that, even if biting, was gracious in its presentation.

And I was one of those who was at the receiving end of that criticism, for Leo and I had our disagreements about Carter. Indeed, our positions reflected a broader difference of opinion in the historiography. Many of the early works on Carter—the “orthodox” interpretation, if you will—were critical of him. These scholars found that while Carter had some successes, particularly in the realm of foreign policy, his distaste for playing the game of Washington politics, his moralism, his assumption that he was a trustee of the American people who knew what was best for them, his flip-flopping on policies, his poor managerial skills, and his lack of vision left him with a record of weakness, if not incompetence.³

Leo was one of the first to adopt a revisionist position on Carter. Challenging what he regarded as “myths” about the former president, he argued in 1988 that Carter was not apolitical as his detractors claimed: “while he was in some ways an atypical politician for the 1970s, he was unquestionably a politician.” Carter’s domestic programs reflected a conservatism that placed him to the right of the majority of his fellow

¹ Andrew DeRoche, *Andrew Young: Civil Rights Ambassador* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2003); Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980); Burton I. Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* (New York: Viking, 1998); Betty Glad, *Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009); and John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

² Leo R. Ribuffo, “Jimmy Carter, Congress, and the Supreme Court,” in Scott Kaufman, ed., *A Companion to Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 379-409.

³ See, for instance, Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*; Erwin C. Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); and Charles O. Jones, *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

Democrats. In terms of foreign policy, Carter was a cold warrior who in some respects was “less conciliatory” toward the Soviet Union than his two Republican predecessors, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Yet there were also continuities between Carter’s diplomatic initiatives and those of not only Nixon and Ford, but his Republican successor, Ronald Reagan.⁴ Numerous other scholars have seconded Leo’s interpretation.⁵

My own research accepts many of the arguments adopted by the orthodox school of thought. I agree that Carter had his successes—the Panama Canal Treaties, the Camp David Accords, promoting environmental legislation, deregulation of industry, and encouraging racial, gender, and ethnic inclusivity. Additionally, I concede that he was at times a victim of events beyond his control, such as the 1979 revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that same year. Yet in my view, Carter’s lack of vision, poor managerial skills, apolitical mindset, and failure to prioritize his initiatives left him with a far more mediocre record than might otherwise have been the case.⁶ To the present, this debate over Carter continues.⁷

I am pleased that Leo’s book, *The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism* has been published, even if it is in unfinished form.⁸ It is an important addition to the historiography on Carter. I just wish I had the chance to speak to Leo about it in person.

⁴ Ribuffo, “Jimmy Carter: Beyond the Current Myths,” *OAH Magazine of History* 3 (1988): 19-23.

⁵ Here, one might consult Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency*; Douglas Brinkley, “The Rising Stock of Jimmy Carter: The ‘Hands on’ Legacy of Our Thirty-Ninth President,” *Diplomatic History* 20 (1996): 505-29; and Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

⁶ Burton I. Kaufman and Scott Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

⁷ Among the most recent works are Stuart Eizenstat, *President Carter: The White House Years* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2018); Jonathan Alter, *His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, a Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020); Amber Roessner, *Jimmy Carter and the Birth of the Modern Media Campaign* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020); Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*, 3rd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020); and Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Crown, 2021); E. Stanly Godbold, Jr., *Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter: Power and Human Rights, 1975-2020* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). The majority of the works tend to offer analyses of Carter more in line with Leo’s, but they admit that the president had his faults, whether it be his propensity for uttering gaffes, his failure to develop a good relationship with the press, or his refusal to play the game of Washington politics.

⁸ Ribuffo, *The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism* (Washington, D.C.: Westphalia Press, 2023).