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## H-Diplo

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**An H-Diplo Book Review Essay**

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**Richard Aldous. *Schlesinger: The Imperial Historian*.** New York: W.W. Norton, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-393-24470-0 (hardcover, \$29.95).

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In the fall of 1999, I attended a conference at the University of Virginia's Miller Center. At the time, the Center was deep into its examination of the Presidential tapes, focusing especially on the Kennedy and Johnson era. Among the more distinguished guests was Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who at the age of 82 appeared physically frail but still mentally sharp. Early in the conference, Schlesinger had expressed his strong disagreement with a paper that was critical of the Kennedy Administration's policy toward Cuba, and this had occasioned some heated debate. Later as we all boarded one of the buses taking us to a conference dinner, someone asked Schlesinger whom he was supporting in the upcoming presidential primaries. "I think I'll be backing Gary Bauer," he said, eliciting laughter from those around him. The idea of the iconic liberal Schlesinger supporting the Republican and social conservative Bauer was appropriately absurd, and helped to lighten the atmosphere on the bus.

Richard Aldous has written a sympathetic but judicious and honest biography of the celebrated Schlesinger, a historian who achieved both academic and popular distinction for his books on Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and perhaps most importantly, John and Robert Kennedy. Two Pulitzer Prizes, a Harvard professorship, the position of special assistant to the President—Schlesinger's career was marked with distinction in both the academic world and the world of public policy, where he sought to have a real impact on the issues he studied. One prominent theme of the Aldous book is the tension between Schlesinger's role as a historian and his desire to be active in the political arena as a speechwriter and adviser, an 'action-intellectual,' something which clearly excited him far more than teaching another graduate seminar. As incredibly productive as Schlesinger was as a writer and historian, his continual interest in engaging in a public role had its consequences. Aldous describes Schlesinger's never-completed *Age of Roosevelt* series as the

collateral damage of Schlesinger's role as a public intellectual, with Volume four of that series something like Schlesinger's great white whale, with him always promising to write it and never delivering.<sup>1</sup>

Schlesinger wrote his own memoir of the first part of his life, and his sons have published a collection of his letters and a part of the journal he kept.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Aldous is the first biographer to have had access to his personal papers. Although he describes Schlesinger's precocious and privileged upbringing, Aldous makes it clear that his parents' decision to advance their son in school came at a cost, making his prep school experience particularly miserable. However, as the son of the distinguished Harvard historian, Arthur Meier Schlesinger, young Arthur came to advance rapidly in the academic world. Aldous describes how young Arthur was helped along by his father in ways that just scream nepotism, including his first Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Jackson*.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the younger Schlesinger's intelligence and extraordinary writing skill seemed to justify his advancement. Clearly, Schlesinger never seemed to consider breaking away from Harvard or the path his father chose for him. Aldous takes to referring to father and son as "Team Schlesinger," and when Arthur Bancroft Schlesinger changed his name to Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Jr., his father's influence and direction of his life became even more evident.

The treatment of foreign policy in the Aldous book is episodic but revealing. Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the great intellectual influences on Schlesinger, and to the extent that Schlesinger possessed a foreign policy vision, it reflected the cautious realism and greater humility that Niebuhr wanted superpower America to reflect. Schlesinger could never bring himself to write the volume of his Roosevelt series that dealt with foreign policy and the approach of World War II, and outside of occasional essays on specific foreign policy topics, like the origins of the Cold War, Schlesinger never did sustained work on the subject. This renders the subtitle of the book, "the imperial historian," somewhat ironic, as Schlesinger had little interest in America as an imperial power, and his famous book, *The Imperial Presidency*, was a sustained attack on the powers that had accrued to the Presidency largely because of foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Schlesinger's true love was for the American political process and especially Democratic Party politics, not issues of America's international role. Schlesinger's devotion to Adlai Stevenson and his active role in his two presidential campaigns comes through clearly in the book, which makes his switch to supporting John Kennedy in 1960 all the more decisive to Schlesinger's subsequent career.

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<sup>1</sup> The three volumes of Schlesinger's *Age of Roosevelt* series are: *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933: the Age of Roosevelt*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), *The Coming of the New Deal, 1933-1935: the Age of Roosevelt*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), and *The Politics of Upheaval, 1935-1936: The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), Schlesinger, Jr., *Journals, 1952-2000*. Edited by Andrew Schlesinger and Stephen Schlesinger (New York: Penguin, 2008), and Schlesinger, Jr., *The Letters of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.*, edited by Andrew Schlesinger and Stephen Schlesinger (New York: Random House, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little Brown, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

In his treatment of Schlesinger's influence on the Kennedy Administration, Aldous does choose to focus on two foreign policy crises, the Bay of Pigs and the Berlin crisis. After Schlesinger's failure to halt the Administration's disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, Aldous describes Schlesinger playing a key role in trying to head off a military confrontation with the Soviet Union over Berlin in the summer of 1961. Fearing that "nothing had been learned from the experience of Cuba," Schlesinger was determined to "open the Oval Office to a wider range of advice, and thereby find ways to push presidential ideas through the system" (246). Ironically enough, given all of the current U.S. discussion about a "deep state," Schlesinger felt he was battling something similar on foreign affairs. He argued that the new Kennedy Administration, "aglow with ideas," found itself immediately colliding "with the feudal barons of the permanent government, entrenched in their domains and fortified by their sense of proprietorship; in turn, the permanent government, confronting this invasion, began almost to function ... as a resistance movement" (246).<sup>5</sup>

Schlesinger pushed back hard, and ultimately successfully, against what he regarded as the excessively hawkish advice on Berlin which former Secretary of State Dean Acheson was providing to Kennedy. Interestingly enough, one of the people he would draw into the White House to counter Acheson was his Harvard colleague Henry Kissinger, who helped compose a memo advocating a more diplomatic than military response to the Berlin crisis. In particular, Schlesinger was concerned that the Administration provide the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, with "an escape hatch," from the crisis, a face-saving way to retreat "from the more extreme implications of his present course without inviting an unacceptably large political humiliation" (253). Aldous sees in Schlesinger's advice a formula that Kennedy would later adopt during the Cuban missile crisis, although Schlesinger himself would not play an active role in those meetings.

Indeed, after Schlesinger's important role during the first year of Kennedy's term, it is hard to see where he figures in any significant policy questions over the rest of the Administration. Aldous makes the case that Schlesinger weighed in on some early discussions of the Vietnam issue, although he was wholly absent from the 1963 Buddhist crisis and the fate of the Ngo Dinh Diem government. Ultimately, Aldous argues that Kennedy wanted Schlesinger around as a matter of his historical legacy. President Kennedy liked Schlesinger personally, and enjoyed talking with him after hours. Kennedy understood and appreciated history, and recognized that having one of America's foremost historians writing the history of his Administration would be a key to his legacy. After the assassination, both Jacqueline Kennedy and Robert Kennedy were determined to help Schlesinger succeed in shaping the American public's understanding of the Kennedy Presidency, and with *A Thousand Days*, they were very successful in this undertaking.<sup>6</sup>

Aldous can be scathing at times in his assessment of Schlesinger as a "court historian," describing Arthur as "sycophantically" questioning Kennedy about why his family turned out so well and the Roosevelts and Churchills turned out so badly (280). This comes after Aldous quotes a Schlesinger memo to Kennedy that glossed over the reckless and juvenile behavior of the younger Kennedy brothers during a trip to Europe in 1962. Schlesinger could be counted on to turn a blind eye to what Aldous calls "the excesses" of the family

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<sup>5</sup> Both the terms "permanent government" and "resistance movement" were striking to read, and even though many will resist any comparison, there are ways in which liberals like Schlesinger thought they faced an encrusted Establishment resistant to change in ways Donald Trump supporters can identify with.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

(281). Aldous also suggests that one reason Schlesinger's later biography of Robert Kennedy was so difficult for him to write was that he could no longer ignore so much that was unflattering in the historical record, including revelations about CIA assassination plots, and John Kennedy's health and womanizing. Although he also praises those moments when Schlesinger "spoke truth to power" (238), the overall impression the author gives is that Schlesinger compromised his historian's honesty for a seat at the table of the powerful. Yet one cannot completely shed the impression that Schlesinger regarded the trade-off as worth it, and that he was glad he had had the opportunity to see government from the inside. This is a perspective that few historians have and which often makes their chronicles of government deficient in understanding and lacking compassion for those leaders who face the real dilemmas of making decisions that affect the fate of their fellow citizens.<sup>7</sup>

As compelling a read as the Aldous biography is, the book does have its limits. It deals with the last four decades of Schlesinger's life in less than 50 pages. There is some justification in this, as Schlesinger's role in the Kennedy Administration, and even more importantly his role in chronicling it in *A Thousand Days*, is absolutely central to an evaluation of his legacy. However, Schlesinger's work after 1965, including his biography of Robert Kennedy and his own foray into the culture wars with *The Disuniting of America*, deserve greater attention, and may well find a subsequent biographical treatment.<sup>8</sup> Even so, Aldous's biography will certainly remain an important guide to understanding Arthur Schlesinger's significance as a chronicler of twentieth-century America.

**Thomas Alan Schwartz** is a Professor of History and Political Science at Vanderbilt University. Most recently, he is the co-editor with Matthias Schulz, *The Strained Alliance: US-European Relations in the 1970s* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). He is currently finishing a study of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger entitled "Henry Kissinger and American Power."

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<sup>7</sup> In his review of the Aldous book, Jeff Shesol recounts how Schlesinger strongly encouraged him to take a job as a speechwriter for President Obama. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-another-arthur-schlesinger-presidential-historian-is-unlikely/2017/10/13/c3e49002-a20c-11e7-8cfe-d5b912fab99\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.570a7d14015d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-another-arthur-schlesinger-presidential-historian-is-unlikely/2017/10/13/c3e49002-a20c-11e7-8cfe-d5b912fab99_story.html?utm_term=.570a7d14015d)

<sup>8</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), and *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).