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The Shaping of a Perspective

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Some historians study the past because they are fascinated by how different it is from the world they are living in, others do so because they want to understand that world better. I am one of the latter sort, which is a good part of the explanation for my choice to work in the field of American history when I had the opportunity to pursue further study after receiving my BA from Cambridge in 1962. The United States loomed large in the world in which I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. It was clearly a much more powerful player in global politics than my own country, Great Britain, and so its actions had a greater significance. Beyond that, it figured prominently in our own lives. We read in our newspapers and heard on the radio a good deal about American politics and culture. America was both the source and the setting of many of the films and books that stirred my imagination. So the United States was not only more important geopolitically than Britain, it also seemed more interesting. I saw it as somewhat romantically exotic but at the same time, through the shared language, apparently more accessible to being learnt about and understood than other foreign countries.

As was (and still to a great extent is) the English practice, my undergraduate course at Cambridge had been exclusively devoted to the single subject of History but American history constituted a very small part of it. Almost all of my time was spent studying British and European history, the main focus being political events with some attention to economic history. I had also taken papers in the history of political thought which fostered an interest in at least that aspect of intellectual history. We undergraduates learnt our history principally through the production of weekly essays on which we were then "supervised," usually by a faculty member though sometimes by a graduate student. That form of learning and instruction has left me not only with a liking for the essay form but also with an inclination to write history as argument rather than narrative and a feeling that the only justification for adding to the stock of scholarly literature is saying something different from what already exists, most straightforwardly by taking issue with part of it.

In those days, it was customary in the United Kingdom to proceed directly from a Bachelor's degree to a doctorate without doing a Master's, and the only requirement for the Ph.D. was to produce a dissertation that was judged to be 'an original contribution to learning.' Rather absurdly, I was expected to propose a particular topic for such a dissertation when I had hardly any background in the history of the United States, let alone in its voluminous and contentious historiography. So before embarking on detailed research, I had to do something to remedy these deficiencies. The works which shaped my initial understanding of America and its history were those that were prominent in the early 1960s, such as David Potter's *People of Plenty* and C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History*.[1] Like many other non-Americans, I found Richard Hofstadter a particularly readable and congenial guide. The so-called consensus school contained people of significantly different political views, but works such as Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition* and Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* were structured by a quasi-Marxist perspective that was not very different from that which

[1] David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960).

I had come as an undergraduate to take rather for granted.[2] For, as Tony Hopkins implicitly indicated in his essay,[3] in this period Marxist concepts and assumptions were pervasive among academic historians in the UK, even those who were not themselves on the left politically. *Past and Present* had become perhaps the most prestigious as well as the most exciting of the scholarly history journals.

After a few months of reading I came up with a topic for my dissertation. It arose from a particularly English version of a question that had been asked by Europeans, particularly those of a left-wing persuasion, since at least the early twentieth century: 'why is there no equivalent of the Labour party in the United States?' I had made what still seems to me the correct judgment that the period to focus on in this respect was the early twentieth century – which was, after all, when the British Labour party emerged. This was when American Socialists enjoyed their greatest electoral success (at least until Bernie Sanders's presidential runs) and when the viewpoints and programs of some prominent progressives seemed not dissimilar from those of European social democrats. It seemed to be generally accepted that these developments were aborted by World War I, and so the broad question I decided to investigate was whether this was indeed the case, and if so how and why.

Researching such a topic in a scholarly way obviously required work on documentary sources that were only available in the United States. The practical and financial problems this might have presented were solved for me in the most complete and pleasant way when I was awarded a Harkness Fellowship. This gave me funding for two years' study in the United States, with the added benefit of a requirement (!) that the summer between these two years be spent travelling through the country (a rented car was provided) so that one became more fully acquainted with it. My time as a Harkness Fellow between September 1963 and July 1965 was my first direct exposure to the United States, and it remains the longest continuous period I have spent in the country. I found it a fascinating, life-enhancing experience. It was an eventful time. I had arrived shortly after the great civil rights march on Washington at which Martin Luther King gave his iconic speech. I spent the first academic year in New York, attached to Columbia University. I was in the stacks of the Butler Library when I overheard someone say "the first since McKinley" and realised that President Kennedy had been shot; I shall never forget the extraordinary stillness of Manhattan the following weekend. Through the good offices of Malcolm Moos, who as a visiting professor was giving a course on American politics, I met a political operative working for Nelson Rockefeller's presidential campaign. This ended up securing me an inside view of the 1964 Republican convention (as part of the "Rockefeller for Scranton" team) and hence I was in the San Francisco Cow Palace when Barry Goldwater gave his acceptance speech declaring that 'extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.' I spent the following semester at the University of California at Berkeley and so was an astonished witness of the Free Speech Movement; I later felt that this was rather like being in Paris in 1789.

My own primary focus was of course on researching my dissertation. The American graduate students I encountered at Columbia were extremely friendly to this English visitor but I found their professionalism and historiographical knowledge somewhat daunting. They spurred me on to engage with the latest works on progressivism, at that time a very lively field, such as Robert Wiebe's *Businessmen and Reform* and Gabriel Kolko's *The Triumph of Conservatism*.[4] Although I was not taking a degree at Columbia, it had been arranged that I should have an academic adviser. Hofstadter, ironically, was in the UK that year, as the visiting Harmsworth Professor of American History at Oxford, so I was assigned to William

[2] Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1955).

[3] Anthony Hopkins, "How I Got There from Here," H-Diplo Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars, 12 February 2020; https://hdiplo.org/to/E190.

[4] Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

Leuchtenburg, who had also written about progressivism.[5] Bill proved a kindly, generous and shrewd mentor, who was to become a lasting friend. Initially, however, he set me off to examine the government agencies established during the period of American belligerency. A week or two in the National Archives, somewhat bewildered by the sheer number of boxes containing the records of the War Industries Board, led me to conclude that although this was undoubtedly an important subject that needed scholarly investigation, I was not the person to do it.[6] I remained more interested in ideas than in the workings of government.

So I resorted to reading periodicals and other published sources. At Berkeley, Lawrence W. Levine became my advisor and with his encouraging guidance I finally defined the scope of my dissertation. I identified about twenty prominent progressive editors and publicists and sought to analyze the effects of World War I upon their thinking. To do this thoroughly was a large research project, which had not been truly completed when I submitted my dissertation. The need to complete and solidify the research was one of the reasons why the book did not appear until 1987.[7] Along the way, the large question from which the project had arisen had been overlain with other, more specific ones about divisions in progressive opinion, and the relationship between people's particular approach to domestic issues and their positions on foreign policy. I came to see the war as having made salient tensions that already existed in these progressives' thought. One was over the power of the state, which they saw as necessary to counter the inegalitarian effects of free market capitalism but potentially oppressive of civil liberties. Another, I suggested, was between their commitment to democracy as a social ideal and their disillusionment with it as a political process (when the ideas and candidates they favored proved electorally unpopular). Recognizing that my focus on these tensions reflected the fact that they existed in my own political attitudes led me to an appreciation of the role introspection could play in historical understanding. This may have led me to exaggerate somewhat the extent to which these progressives' thinking was similar to that of new liberals and social democrats at the same time in Britain; nevertheless it was the case that many of them in 1918-19 hailed the British Labour party and looked for the emergence of an American equivalent.

Long before the appearance of *Reformers and War,* the focus of my research had shifted from the evolution of American liberalism to United States foreign policy, and in particular the views and attitudes that had shaped it. This was a consequence of the Vietnam war. U.S. involvement had escalated decisively while I had been in America between 1963 and 1965, and it distressed me greatly that a country that I liked, and now felt involved with, was acting in what I saw as a morally indefensible way. But I was also puzzled. Why was the United States prepared to pay such a high price – in terms of casualties, dollars, internal harmony, and international moral standing - to prevent Communists taking over a place as lacking in strategic importance and economic value as South Vietnam? This puzzlement was only deepened by the extent to which the debate, both in the public media and among us graduate students, was conducted in terms of security and economic interests. Those who defended the administration's policy argued that it was necessary for the sake of America's own security. Most opponents of the war were convinced that it was being fought to make the world safe for American capitalism. When I came to focus as a historian on U.S. foreign policy, I found that these arguments were reflected in the two most widely held explanations for the global policy that had led the United States to fight such a controversial war in South-east Asia. Most mainstream historians saw this policy as a response to threats to the nation's security – a policy adopted with a reluctance that had only been overcome by the painful experience of forced involvement in two World

[5] Notably, William E. Leuchtenburg, "Progressivism and Imperialism: The Progressive Movement and American Foreign Policy, 1896-1916," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39 (December 1952): 483-504, an essay that bore directly on my research topic.

[6] A few years later, this research was undertaken by Robert Cuff, leading to his excellent and illuminating study, *The War Industries Board: Business-Government relations during World War I* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[7] John A. Thompson, *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Wars.[8] Revisionists, on the other hand, saw the policy as the product of an internally generated drive to create and maintain an "Open Door world" in which American exports would find the profitable markets necessary to sustain the domestic prosperity that legitimated the capitalist system.[9]

I found neither of these explanations persuasive, and my first foray into the field of foreign policy history was a critical review article on the work of William Appleman Williams and other leading revisionists.[10] This article was written before I had read the rather similar critique by Robert W. Tucker, but I already knew and had been influenced by Tucker's earlier analysis of the debate over Vietnam, and particularly of the origins and validity of the conception of national security that provided the rationale for America's involvement.[11] So when I was in Washington in 1975-1976, as a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, I made a point of becoming acquainted with Bob Tucker, who taught at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Study (SAIS) in DC, and this was the beginning of a long and fruitful friendship. While researching my dissertation, I had found very useful the major work by Tucker's colleague at SAIS, Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations*.[12] The way realists like Osgood and Tucker placed American debates over foreign policy in the context of the nation's objective security situation attracted me and has had a lasting influence on my approach. However, I dissented from the conclusion, which furnished the central theme of Osgood's book, that the global role the United States had assumed in the 1940s had been a necessary response to threats to the nation's own security. Again, my first attempts to question this view took the form of articles.[13]

Not surprisingly, perhaps, these brief articles did little to change the widely held belief that it was anxiety over America's own safety that had led to the abandonment of "isolationism" in 1940-1941. I realized that my argument needed developing if it was to be more persuasive, and also that rejecting both the economic and the strategic explanations for the global role the United States has played since the 1940s obliged me to produce another way of accounting for it. A fellowship at the National Humanities Center in 1993-1994 provided an ideally supportive environment for embarking on this project. I began by reading more widely in the political science literature, particularly that of the Realist school, in order to refine my understanding of the concepts of 'power' and 'security' that would structure my analysis. My friendship with Melvyn Leffler also dates from this time, and I have benefited enormously with exchanging thoughts with him over the years, particularly about what U.S. policymakers in the 1940s and 1950s meant by 'national security.' After initially attempting to map out a

[8] This view was to be found in many introductory texts. See, for example, Robert A. Divine, *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965); John W. Spanier, *American Foreign Policy since World War II* Revised Edition (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962).

[9] Most influentially, William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1962); *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969).

[10] Thompson, "William Appleman Williams and the "American Empire'," *Journal of American Studies* 7 (April 1973): 91-104.

[11] Robert W. Tucker, *The Radical Left and American Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); *Nation or Empire?: The Debate over American Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968).

[12] Robert Endicott Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

[13] Thompson, "The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition," *Diplomatic History* 16 (Winter 1992): 23-43; Thompson, "Another Look at the Downfall of 'Fortress America'," *Journal of American Studies* 26 (December 1992): 393-408.

general analysis of the factors shaping U.S. foreign policy, I concluded that the case could be made more persuasively through an historical account of the process by which the United States had come to assume a responsibility for world order.

My work on this project was suspended when I received an invitation from Longman to contribute a volume on Woodrow Wilson to their *Profiles in Power* series. I was happy to do this, particularly as it would give me an opportunity to develop an interpretation of Wilson's policymaking during World War I that I had already sketched in an article. Whereas most historians, whether admirers or critics, realists or revisionists, have seen Wilson's conduct of U.S. policy as shaped by some consistent, long-term goal (which has been very variously defined), I was more struck by the extent to which he sought different outcomes at different times as he responded to immediate pressures and circumstances.[14] I also welcomed the opportunity to attempt a different form of history - not an investigation of a specific historical issue but the narrative of a life and career (though not a full-scale biography). The recent completion of the magnificent 69-volume edition of the *Wilson Papers* enabled me to base the book largely on primary sources (and without leaving Cambridge).[15]

Following completion of the Wilson book, I returned to the project of attempting to explain America's assumption of a global role through an analytic narrative of the way this had come about. The question defined the relevant period. It was the remarkable growth of the American economy in the late nineteenth century that gave the nation the capacity to exert a significant influence on great power politics – a capacity that it had clearly lacked earlier. By the end of the Truman administration the die had been cast and the United States had assumed commitments and responsibilities across the globe and also developed the institutions and capabilities that have enabled it to play a uniquely extensive and influential role in world affairs ever since. In the intervening decades, the extent of involvement in the politics of other continents oscillated, and these oscillations reflected the course of internal debate over the nature of the nation's interests and responsibilities. Studying those debates and oscillations revealed the influence of various specific circumstances and interests but I concluded that two general factors were crucial in creating the domestic consensus required for a long-term commitment entailing significant costs. The first was the impact of major external events, especially the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. The second was the extraordinary margin of superiority the United States enjoyed over all other states in terms of material resources. This did not in and of itself lead to the exercise of the potential power that this superiority brought, I argued, but consciousness of the nation's potential ability to achieve foreign policy objectives seemed to me to have created a mentality that both extended the scope of those objectives and strengthened the will to pursue them actively.[16] This concept of "a sense of power" as an explanatory variable did not impress some critics, particularly political scientists who saw it as no more than an incidental concomitant of the real dynamic, the objective scale of the nation's power. My highlighting of the psychological dimension may well have arisen from sensitivity to the difference, which was evident in the documentary record as well as in the history I had lived through, between the mind-set of American policymakers and of their British counterparts as they addressed issues on which the two countries had shared interests and goals.

This brings me back to perhaps the most basic aspect of my perspective on U.S. history: that I am not an American and do not live in the United States. My career has been spent at UK universities, first University College London, and, since 1971, at Cambridge; teaching U.S. history mainly to British students has further encouraged me to present an outside view, or at least to act as a sort of translator. This external situation has entailed serious disadvantages and limitations. It made it more

[14] Thompson, "Woodrow Wilson and World War I: A Reappraisal," *Journal of American Studies* 19 (December 1985): 325-348. A more fully worked out version of the argument is Thompson, "More Tactics than Strategy: Woodrow Wilson and World War I, 1914-1919," in William N. Tilchin and Charles E. Neu, eds., *Artists of Power: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Their Enduring Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006): 95-115.

[15] Arthur S. Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966–94); Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson* (London: Longman, 2002).

[16] Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015).

difficult to do research in primary sources, particularly in the years before the internet. More importantly, perhaps, an outsider lacks the instinctive understanding of a culture and its nuances that comes with growing up and living in it. Many of my generation of Americanists in the UK, embarrassed by the amateur character of much earlier British writing on American history, sought to make their work indistinguishable from that of American scholars. While I shared the aspiration to meet the highest professional standards, I never thought this goal was either achievable or desirable. The drawbacks of being an outsider seemed inescapable, but I have seen some compensating benefit in the detachment that comes from distance. Much American history written by Americans seems to be part of an internal conversation about how far the country's past, and the role in it of particular individuals and groups, has been in accord with the nation's values. The contributions of outsiders can be seen as irrelevant or else enlisted in the essentially political debates that inspire so much scholarship. From my more disengaged perspective, I have been less interested in judging the past, or particular historical actors, than in gaining a greater understanding of this fascinating and complex country, and particularly of what has shaped the uniquely important part it has played in the affairs of the world over the last century.

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