"THE SCHOLAR"
ROY F. NICHOLS AND
THE REHABILITATION OF
AMERICAN POLITICAL HISTORY

BY DAVID M. POTTER

Among American historians, it would be difficult to find another whose professional interests have been at the same time so omnivorous and so discriminating, so enthusiastic and so analytical, so extensive and at the same time intensive as those of Roy F. Nichols. Usually, each attribute in these pairs is developed at the expense of the other. A man with a gusto for detailed minutiae is likely to neglect the philosophical values of his theme, or vice versa. Exuberance is likely to be indiscriminate and a fastidious discrimination inhibits enthusiastic productivity. Many of the great specialists are notoriously oblivious to matters outside the orbit of their specialty, and some of the most eminent generalists have built their overarching hypothesis on sketchy research and mistaken notions of detail.

Anyone knowing only the variety of Nichols' activities might plausibly wonder whether he must not be a dilettante. His interests have ranged from the most abstract levels of theorizing about the use of behavioral concepts in history to insignificant but difficult problems of genealogy—perhaps the least conceptual branch of historical study. His writings have ranged over several centuries of Anglo-American politics, with extensive forays into the question of the relation of the behavioral sciences to history, into the nature of historical generalization, into the value of local history, and into the establishment of models which would relate political history more closely to social science and make it less a miscellany of chronology punctuated with anecdote.

But amid all this diversity, it is my belief that the central importance of Nichols' work lies in his rehabilitation of political history—a rehabilitation accomplished partly through his perception that political history is a far broader subject in its implications than its traditional practitioners had perceived, partly through his use of behavioral approaches from the social sciences, and partly
through his patient willingness to work both at the surface level of detailed narrative chronicle, and also at deeper levels where a questing, probing investigator might grasp the broader meaning of events. No statement characterizes his approach to history better than his own affirmation that "If the writing of history is to have its greatest significance and be more than a mere narrative of events, it ought to attempt to communicate the meaning of what men have done."  

Where an historian has written significantly at the level of both theory and practice—both conceptualization and application—and where he has linked his work at these two levels with effectiveness, it is somewhat arbitrary, but perhaps nevertheless necessary, to separate the two levels in discussing his work. It is also, to some degree, arbitrary to place the consideration of his practice before that of his theory, or vice versa. In the case of Nichols, however, it seems to me that his theory grew more out of his practice than the reverse. Hence I would date the beginning of his work in the rehabilitation of American political history from the publication in 1923 of his doctoral dissertation at Columbia, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854. This work placed him, at the outset of his career, in a position where his principal theme was political party, party structure, organization, and function. It also placed him in a period where developments were leading to a situation in which party organization proved unable to handle the disruptive forces at work in the society. The democratic process failed; disruption and Civil War followed. In other words, Nichols had entered upon a study of political history in a context which illustrates the most crucial and most universal question of politics. To what extent can society devise mechanisms which will enable its members to live together, to engage in disputes and rivalries (conflict rather than consensus), and to resolve these potentially disruptive divisions without tearing the social fabric and without violence. The art of politics, as Nichols later expressed it was to maintain a "rule of law" and to avoid a "rule of force," to use the pen politically in a way which would make unnecessary any resort to the sword, to substitute "writing" for "fighting."  

formulations of the ultimate function of politics did not reach their final phrasing until forty years later, but with The Democratic Machine, Nichols was already on his way with a detailed study of the politics of the fifties as a specific theme, which was also a study of the theoretical general problem of the extent and limits of the potentialities of political action as a means of adjusting antagonistic forces without recourse to physical hostilities. During the succeeding forty-four years, Nichols produced a series of volumes which ranged forward and backward over his context, in a progression that moved through the tensions of the fifties, to the Civil War and into the Reconstruction period, and then turned back to examine political origins from the time of Alfred the Great, through English political history and the history of the colonies, to the study of the political organizations of Federalists, Jeffersonians, Jacksonians, and Whigs which preceded the party organizations of the eighteen fifties.

What was to evolve into a grand enterprise reached its second stage with the biography of Franklin Pierce in 1931. In 1948, it reached its apex with The Disruption of American Democracy, which received the Pulitzer Prize. The Disruption carried the story through the failure of the party mechanism to prevent the Civil War. But this was by no means the end of the opus, for his Blueprints for Leviathan: American Style (1963) developed some of both the microscopic and the telescopic aspects of his theme. Approximately the first quarter of this book dealt with the broad political background both in England and America, and with the erection of political mechanisms in America up to 1790; the second quarter moved swiftly from there to the crisis of the eighteen fifties and gave the most thorough description ever penned of the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the House of Representatives. The bulk of the book, thereafter dealt with the breakdown of the political system of the Union in the months immediately preceding the Civil War, the creation of a second political mechanism or Leviathan (the Confederacy), the failure of the Confederate Leviathan (partly because the Southerners themselves were not wholehearted in the support of their new system), and the increased integration and centralization of power in the Leviathan of the Union, as a consequence of the war itself and of the Reconstruction amendments. Having pushed his study for-
ward to the 1870's in Blueprints for Leviathan, Nichols then fell back to the period before 1848 for his Invention of the American Political Parties in 1967. In this volume, which was the first in chronological sequence and the last in time of composition of a five volume work, he examined the history of the formation of American political parties, with broad attention to the English and early American background and with extended scrutiny of the Federalist, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Whig political combinations. He concluded that these were not fully-institutionalized or fully organized parties, but were more in the nature of ad hoc groups, gotten together for the purposes of contesting specific political issues. In his view, the millennium-long evolution of the American political party was not complete until the organizations had developed national central committees and systems of party financing, and these processes became complete in the Democratic Party of 1848. It is clear that when Nichols restricts the term "party" to a political organization with these attributes, he is using the term in a different sense from that employed by Richard McCormick, who regards the Democratic-Republican alignment of the eighteen fifties as the "third" American party system. But as Noble Cunningham has remarked, the question is a definitional one. Nichols does not deny the significance of the earlier organizations, and McCormick would probably not deny the greater institutional completeness of the later structures.

As this essay has already suggested, the most remarkable feature of Nichols' work is the way in which it combines close attention to the details of narrative history with a broad use of the narrative to illustrate theoretical propositions. Many historians who concerned themselves with theory have subordinated their narrative to their intellectual constructs. Thus, while Turner's name is forever linked with the frontier hypothesis, and while Hofstader's work is essential to anyone who would understand the historiography of the "Progressive Era," one would find Billington far more satisfactory than Turner for the narrative of Frontier history, and Mowry or Link than Hofstader for the narrative of the "Progressive" years. But with Nichols, the narrative has a richness for its own sake, apart from the ideas, so that if one cares only about the antecedents of the Civil War, Nichols will meet one

*In American Historical Review, LXXIII (February, 1968), 902.*
more than half way on that ground, but if one is concerned with the theoretical problem of the avoidability of evidence, one finds that Nichols has moved that question away from the riddle of “irresponsibility” and sheer determinism on to a more practicable level which seeks to measure the limits of what the instruments of political accommodation are capable of accomplishing in a situation of strife.

As an historian of the Civil War era, Nichols is one of the great researchers, as well as one of the great interpreters. For The Disruption of American Democracy, he conducted research in twenty-six states. His bibliography lists 117 manuscript collections, from 48 different depositories, including eight private libraries. It is easy to imagine the charm with which he overcame the reluctance of these eight proprietors; and from the awesome detail of his citations, which sometimes crowd a score of references into a single footnote, it is easy to see that these collections were indeed not merely visited, or looked at, but were thoroughly combed. I abstain from comparable data on his use of newspapers (72 files are listed) and printed materials, in which he was equally exhaustive.

When Nichols signed the preface to the Disruption on May 31, 1954, the literature of the Civil War bore little resemblance to what it is today. Allan Nevins had signed the Preface to Ordeal of the Union exactly two months earlier, but it was not until three years later, in The Emergence of Lincoln, that Nevins moved onto the ground which Nichols was traversing in the Disruption. When the Disruption came from the press, the one dominant authority on the era of the Civil War was James Ford Rhodes. Other major works then extant included Nicolay and Hay’s Lincoln, Beveridge’s Lincoln, the first two volumes of Randall’s Lincoln, Channing’s sixth volume, Craven’s Coming of the Civil War and Cole’s The Irrepressible Conflict. No professional historian had as yet formally counterattacked the positions of Craven and Randall, and most of the available biographical studies, now so largely superseded, were of the vintage of the American Statesman series. Three of the foremost were Bancroft’s Seward (1900), Allen Johnson’s Douglas (1908), and George Font Milton’s Eve of Conflict (1934) which was, in fact, a biography of Douglas. Some new works, like Brigance’s Black,
Ranck's *A. G. Brown*, and White's *Rhett* had begun to appear. From these points of departure, the *Disruption* was a major step indeed.

To begin with, Nichols was truly steeped in the milieu of the period. He knew the hangers-on and the back-benchers as well as the leading actors in the drama. This knowledge gave him an insight into the significance of seemingly trivial events whose meaning might have been overlooked by one less thoroughly saturated in the situation. He could hardly have sensed the nuances in the Congress better if he had been a member himself, and he understands the problems posed for the party leaders by such highly personal factors as the corruptibility, the erratic qualities, or the lack of sobriety of individual Congressmen. To illustrate, in exploring the growing rift between Buchanan and Douglas, Nichols notes an occasion when Buchanan addressed a letter to "The Hon. Samuel A. Douglas"—a "lapse of the pen" which could not have been ingratiating to the Little Giant. Or again, in discussing whether secession, even in its final stages, was partly a bluff, he notes that when the Slidells bade good-bye to Washington in February, 1861, Mrs. Slidell left most of her extensive wardrobe behind, very much as she might have done between session of Congress. He understands all the details and all the intricacies: I believe his book is the only general account in print which explains how it was possible for Douglas and Lincoln, running against each other in New Jersey on rival statewide tickets, to divide the electoral vote of the state, instead of having it go all one way or all the other.

This total familiarity with a vast mass of detail makes not only for vivid and lively narrative, but, also for a grasp of the intrinsic meaning of the events. Thus Nichols was, I believe, the first writer to appreciate fully (in his paper "The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography") that while Douglas appeared to be in self-assured command of the Congressional situation at the time of Kansas-Nebraska, he had, in fact been trapped in a political situation where "a bill ostensibly to organize a territory had been made an instrument of the fundamental political reorganization that the disintegration of the old parties had made inevitable. . . . The great volcano of American politics was in a state of eruption. In the midst of the cataclysm, one sees Douglas crashing and hurtling about, caught like a rock in a gush of lava. When the
flow subsided, old landmarks were found to be greatly altered or obliterated.”

Again, no one who did not savor detail—apparently random detail—for its own sake, could have portrayed, as Nichols does, the nature of the clique of Senatorial managers who engineered the nomination of Buchanan and, to a great extent controlled administration policy during both the Pierce and the Buchanan administrations. The personalities of James A. Bayard, Judah Benjamin, and especially those two case-hardened exponents of ruthless, backstairs politics—Jesse Bright and John Slidell—these personalities were themselves formative in creating the rigidities which made it impossible by 1860 to make adjustments and concessions which might hold the party together.

Or further, to take one more illustration, Nichols shows his mastery of the factual realities of the secession crisis by the way in which he brushes aside the arguments of some writers that the South over-reacted to the loss of a single Presidential election. As their argument runs, the South was still protected politically by a control of the Senate and also of the Supreme Court. Lincoln would be helpless against the obstructions which these bodies could raise, and the South had only to patiently ride out the four short years of his administration. But as Nichols perceptively recognizes, the loss of power in Washington, though galling, was not decisive, and the Southerners knew it. What was decisive was maintaining an intellectual embargo in the South, and behind the barriers of that embargo, first, a degree of solidarity among Southern whites, which would bind the non-slaveholders to the slaveholders in the mystic brotherhood of white supremacy, and second, a degree of isolation for the blacks which would insulate them from insurrectionary propaganda, and thus diminish the nameless danger which transcended all others. The realistic fear in the South was not fear of direct anti-slavery action by Lincoln; it was fear that the embargo would be broken, and that the non-slaveholders would defect or that the slaves would revolt. “If elected,” says Nichols, “Lincoln would have the federal patronage at his command. He would be appointing a postmaster in every community. Where would he find the men? Not among the

4 Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLIII (September, 1956), 187-212, esp. p. 212.
aristocracy, not among the fire-eaters, not among the Democrats. Might they not be men of his own humble origin? Already that idea was stirring in the minds of some of the ambitious. . . . Worse still, Lincoln might appoint free Negroes. . . . The new postmasters would not censor the mails, would not burn abolition papers. They would preach to the poor against the rule of the rich and would stir up a class struggle to create a new order in the name of democracy."

The peril of Lincoln's election was not that it jeopardized Southern control in national politics, but that it undermined the ascendancy of the planting class in the South—a precarious ascendancy built upon the magic of an unchallenged command, upon the unquestioning loyalty of Southern whites and the unquestioning submission of Southern slaves. But one cleverly aimed question could shatter the magic and the loss of command in national politics made it ever so much easier for someone, white or black, to ask the shattering question.

In short, Nichols' volumes on the period leading to the Civil War represent narrative history at its best. Except for Allan Nevins, who has written on a still broader scale, and Avery Craven, whose scale is uneven (in the sense that he deals with some matters in great detail and with others summarily), there is no modern writer whose account of the road to war can compare with that of Nichols. On analytical points, and on the annals of legislative history and party history, he is, in my opinion, even better than Nevins, which is to say that, on these aspects, he is better than anyone else writing on a general scale.

With the natural gusto and enthusiasm of his temperament, Nichols seems thoroughly to enjoy "Civil War history" for its own sake. From his autobiographical A Historian's Progress (an unblushingly "progressive" title, and much less ironical than Henry Adams' "Education"), it appears that he was one of the few professional historians who took spontaneous pleasure in the four long years of the Civil War Centennial—during which he produced many unpublished addresses, a published paper on "Fighting in North Carolina Waters," and an introduction to a new edition of Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (1956). All

---

* New York, 1968.
* North Carolina Historical Review, XL (Winter, 1963), 75-84.
this is to say that if he had confined himself entirely to narrative history, his kind of narrative has enough vitality and imagination, is based upon enough careful delving in the sources, and is of sufficient extent to have established the eminence of his work.

But from the outset he meant to be an analytical historian as well as a narrative one. This purpose has constantly shaped his writing, adding another dimension to his history and requiring a recognition of his historical theory as well as of his historical practice. In fact, with all deference to other narrative historians of the Civil War, Nichols is perhaps the only one who has shown enough interest in theory to make it seem uncertain at times whether his theoretical formulations are primarily a major spin-off from a study, made for its own sake, of the coming of the war; or whether the coming of the war is to him a gigantic case study in the function and malfunction of political mechanisms. Perhaps history is at its finest when it moves between unique events and overarching generalizations so skillfully that one can never be quite certain whether the concrete events are unravelled in order to illustrate the theoretical proposition, or the theoretical proposition is adduced to illuminate the otherwise insignificant detail.8

It is difficult, also, to tell how Nichols came by his interest in the theoretical aspects of political history. He, himself, in his An Historian's Progress tends to emphasize his specific contacts with men who stimulated his interest in theory. In the Spring of 1931, he participated in a conference with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Dixon R. Fox, R. W. D. Connor, Merle E. Curti, Ralph H. Gabriel, and Samuel F. Bemis which brought in a report recommending that historians should seek to profit by the insights and new methods developed "by the more specialized branches of learning concerned with the study of human behavior." Nichols himself observes that "this conceptualization was one that I have found basic to much of my own thinking and working." Three years later, he was chosen as a delegate of the American Historical Association to the Social Science Research Council, and he remained a member of the Board of the Council for twenty-two years.9 During these years the behavioral sciences made immense

8 "The nature of the conflict can be better understood if it is considered as part of an ancient pattern rather than as an isolated incident, as part of a long contest rather than as a struggle merely of moments in the mid-nineteenth-century United States." Blueprints for Leviathan, p. x.
9 An Historian's Progress, pp. 116-121.
strides. In a chapter entitled "Among the Behavioral Scientists," in An Historian's Progress, Nichols speaks of his association with men who very often questioned the worth of history, and who in fact were far more concerned with problems of conceptualization and generalization than most historians were. Contact with such men, he says "gave me a clearer insight into the significance of history as a mental discipline. Knowledge of history was certainly a phase of behavioral science and my behavioral conceptualization was guiding me into a broader humanism." There is no doubt that Nichols was, indeed, significantly influenced by the viewpoints of the behavioral scientists. He mentions that these men emphasized "long-term secular trends, cycles of behavior, recurring patterns of rivalry and adjustment," and indeed one can recognize all of these themes as threads running through his books on the era preceding the Civil War. Also, he became vitally concerned with the theoretical side of the writing of history and he was a moving spirit in an important series of three studies all of which were sponsored by the Social Science Research Council and two of which were published by it. Its Bulletin 54 (Theory and Practice in Historical Study [1946]) and its Bulletin 64 (Social Sciences in Historical Study, [1954]) were both produced while he was a member of the Board of the Council, and Louis Gottschalk's edited volume of essays on Generalization in the Writing of History (1963), contained a paper by Nichols on "The Genealogy of Historical Generalizations." The thesis of his paper turned upon the argument that an indispensable means toward new generalizations is the full understanding by the writer of past generalizations, and of the emotional or the cognitive factors which produced such generalizations. Nichols reviewed the impact of generalizations from the social sciences as contributing to the changes in generalization about the Civil War, and he placed the importance of "new evidence" in a realistic perspective when he observed that, "Under changing circumstances, generalizations are modified not so much because new evidence is discovered as because new minds are at work in a different cultural atmosphere." Certainly the evolution

10 Ibid., p. 122.
11 Ibid., p. 132.
12 Nichols was a member of the Council's Committee on Historical Analysis, which guided the shaping of this volume.
of Afro-American history over the last two decades richly illustrates this axiom.

On the American Civil War, though Nichols had done as much as anyone to illustrate its uniqueness, his controlling impulse was to determine its place in a context of generalization. "The conflict" he said, "was not unique; it was but one of a class of social wars which may occur anywhere in any epoch. . . . At various times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . there has been the common phenomenon of national unification, generally including a phase of social war, notably in Germany, Italy, and the Dual monarchy. Similar struggles on the field of battle or over the negotiation table have resulted in division as well as unification, in such instances as the separation of Belgium from Holland and of Norway from Sweden and as the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the Russia of the Tsars, and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. . . . The American Civil War was perhaps only an example of this type of metanationalistic reaction."14

There is no doubt that Nichols' interest in and development of historical theory was sharpened on the whetstone of his association with the behavioral sciences, but I suspect that his own temperament and the challenges of the medium in which he works would have impelled him toward generalization in any case. "By the age of eight," he remarks—and this was some time before he had met any behavioral scientists—"I was deeply interested in the politics of liberalism."15 At the outset of his career, in 1923, when he published his doctoral dissertation on *The Democratic Machine* he included a foreword which looks most unorthodox in a doctoral dissertation, in which he suggested that politicians are distinguished from other entrepreneurs by the fact that they deal in power and not in commodities—they acquire or lose status as their quantum of power increases or diminishes. "The history of the Democratic Party during the interlude between the sectional struggles of 1850 and 1854 presents an excellent field for the study of the genus politician. In those days, public opinion was generally apathetic and the politicians plied their trade with little interference."16 During the next four decades, Nichols was to examine a vast array of individual politicians with close and

15 *An Historian's Progress*, p. 276.
eager attention to the details and even the minutiae of their careers, but at the outset, the politician was already a type as well as an individual. In the words of Ogden Nash, "Bankers are just like other people only richer." Politicians, also were like other people, only they were working for different kinds of goals in a different kind of medium.

What I mean to suggest is that while Nichols certainly became interested in historical theory, I believe his interest is intrinsically more philosophical than it is methodological. I think also that his historical association with certain personalities such as Stephen A. Douglas, James Buchanan, George Sanders, John Slidell, August Belmont, and others stimulated the speculative qualities of his mind even more than his personal association with colleagues on the Social Science Research Council. Most of all, I think the narrowness and conceptual poverty of American political history at the time when he embarked on his professional career virtually compelled a man of high talents either to abandon political history or to attempt to rehabilitate it as a scholarly study. For by the nineteen twenties the great days of political history, when "History is past politics and politics is present history" were long gone. The institutional focus, once regnant at the Johns Hopkins University, had begun to rigidify even before the turn of the century, and had been boldly challenged by Frederick Jackson Turner as early as 1893. In 1927, four years after Nichols published his Democratic Machine, intellectual history made a brilliant debut with the first volume of Vernon Parrington's Main Currents of American Thought, and in the same year, the first of a thirteen volume series on American social history (the Schlesinger and Fox Series) also appeared. Some of the most imaginative of the younger American historians were turning in these new directions. Meanwhile, political history suffered from conventionality and a willingness to accept superficial treatment of surface events—a tendency which was later irrefutably exposed in Thomas C. Cochran's "The Presidential Synthesis in American Political History.""1 As historians were dividing the terrain of history into fractionized fields, the spokesmen of intellectual, social, economic, and cultural history seemed to claim all the fertile territory, while political history was sharply separated from cultural history, as

1 American Historical Review, LIII (July, 1948), 748-759.
if the two were antithetical, and politics was left with an arid tract which appeared sterile to many historians. It is no exaggeration to say that political history faced a real crisis in the 1930's and '40's.

Nichols himself sensed the desiccation that seemed to be overtaking American political history. "To me," he writes in his autobiography, "unselective descriptive chronicles were coming to have a minimum of meaning."\(^{18}\) But far from abandoning political history for this season, he was deeply convinced that it need not be purely descriptive, need not be indiscriminate or random in its recital of facts, and most of all, that it did not exist in isolation from culture and that it was of crucial significance to society.

Political history is the history of the distribution and exercise of power, and as long as power is important, the history which tells where power is vested and how it is used must be important. As Nichols wrote in 1948, in a brilliant defense of political history,

One of the basic motivations in politics is the desire for power. But how much do we in the United States know of the history of power? Where has it resided from time to time? How has it really been exercised? Here we should find the data regarding the constant struggle between the traditionalist and the reformer often complicated by the not too obvious participation of the interloper. Does power reside in the hands of those who ostensibly are charged with its exercise? With the increasing responsibility of government for matters of technological and military policy and power, how can self-government safeguard traditional rights and liberties and at the same time wield the power necessary to carry out the new responsibilities? Have Americans taken too much for granted the automatic operation of government to protect for them their rights and liberties without being willing to assume the responsibility for looking out for these rights themselves?\(^{19}\)

If power is historically important, then politics must be important, for politics is the medium within which questions of power are usually worked out. Nichols had grasped this vital point clearly as early as 1922-23, for at that time he wrote a memo-

\(^{18}\) *An Historian's Progress*, p. 145.

randum dealing in part with the relation between conflict on the one hand, and political and party history on the other. Observing first that the basic antagonisms leading to conflict in American society had been to a great extent economic in their nature, he went on to observe that these antagonisms had taken the overt form of conflict of section against section and class against class, but that an analysis of the conflict purely in terms of sectional or class tensions "does not lead to a profound understanding of the workings of history unless particular attention is paid to the personnel of these groups and the machinery used by these sections or classes in their struggle for control of government. This machinery has been the party system . . . the keystone of this system has been the party organization or machine." In short, when sectional or class antagonism materializes, it materializes in the form of political conflict.

By this cogent logic, Nichols, at the outset of his career, made his case for the basic importance of political history, and even of party history, to the understanding of any society in which the public participates in the political process. Far from accepting the separation of political experience from culture, and even ideology, he perceived that the political system of any society is perhaps the most significant and revealing aspect of that society's culture. This point was most ably stated in his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1967:

There are various types of cultural definition, but one in particular can be especially useful: namely, I believe, the design most indicative of the nature and identity of any society. This is its plan of operation, the force or influence that organizes it and keeps within it a semblance of recognizable structure and order. In highly complicated societies, this plan takes the form of government, the customs of rule, of the exercise of authority, of the structure of power. A culture, therefore, may be known as a democracy, an empire, a totalitarian state. Any such designation is not merely derived from constitutional institutions, but it embraces attitudes, ideas of community identification, and social as well as political relationships. The distinguishing characteristic of the society known as the United States of America is the fact that it is a democratic culture dedicated to a self-government in which all are technically involved and in which this interest is

---

20 Quoted in *An Historian's Progress*, pp. 39-40.
demonstrably central to the self-identification of the people. It can be used as the hallmark of the culture.\textsuperscript{21}

In short, the allocation and use of power is one of the most vital aspects of any society; this allocation and use is determined and operated by a political process; and the political process is a central feature of the whole system of attitudes, ideology, and modes of action which form the heart of a culture. In the factionized world of diverse historical "fields," political history can still claim a place as the keystone. But it can only make good this claim if it abandons the random recital of surface events and comes to grips with the fundamental political questions. Among these questions, none is more basic than the question what a political system is intended to do, and whether it functions in such a way as to do what is intended. Like all democratic political systems, the American system was intended, above all, to mediate the rivalries, antagonisms, and conflicts within the society and to resolve them in such a way that conflict would not reach the level of large-scale violence and that the forces of integration would continue to hold the ascendancy over the forces of disintegration or disruption. For seven decades, from 1789 to 1861, the American political system had brilliantly fulfilled these intentions, and then, in 1861, it reached the one point in our history where it failed to do so. Why did the system fail in 1861?

Nichols has devoted five volumes, more or less, to working out his answers to this question, and this essay can hardly undertake a resume of his conclusions, which involve many factors. The important point here is that he did not ask merely the specific question, "Why the Civil War?" but also the generic question, "Why did a politically integrative process reverse itself and become, for two decades, a disintegrative process?" and not merely "Why was there acute sectional antagonism?" which is easy, but "Why did this particular antagonism result in a social war?" which is highly difficult.

Without undertaking a full review of Nichols' answers, it may be appropriate at least to indicate some of his leading ideas, and even more to indicate the structure of his ideas, for as he himself remarks, though he had never heard of models or model building,

he was "quite unconsciously planning a model." While he was modestly telling his inquiring friends "that I was working on Buchanan," he was in fact working on an analysis of the factors necessary to the success of a democratic political system. His analysis required a consideration of the political system as a whole, and not merely a focus on the personality traits of prominent figures or the dramatic episodes of political conflict. The old-style political history, confined to the reenactment of battles in the legislative arena is rather like the old style "drum and trumpet" military history, confined to engagements on the "field of combat"—gallant cavalry charges, heroic rear-guard actions and the like. But as genuine military history must include a consideration of weaponry, recruitment, supply, logistics, et cetera, a true political history must include an analysis of the nature of political organization. Thus, Nichols' "model" involved a sweeping examination of the political system of the United States, in functional rather than in constitutional terms. As he himself states it, he found seven basic features.

First of these features was the fact that by the 1840's politics had become a profession. That is, political activity was conducted by men who made a career of it, in rivalry with other men who also made a career of it and who made it their business to implement successfully (for themselves, that is) the impulses of the part of the society which they represented or sought to represent. Most were "organization men," which made for a kind of politics quite different from what a group of volunteers would have conducted. Second, these professionals survived or perished in a process of popular elections (even senatorial elections were indirectly popular, for state legislators who voted for senators were elected with some reference to the question whom they would support for senator). Survival often depended on the candidate's ability to formulate real or fictitious political issues in terms which would arouse the emotions of the voters. Third, since state and

22 *An Historian's Progress*, p. 148.
23 I personally can especially appreciate the cryptic understatement that Nichols was "working on Buchanan," for I wrote an M.A. essay on certain aspects of the election of '56, and I too found it a convenient evasion to say that I was working on Buchanan. When I imparted this information to one inquiring lady of my acquaintance, the only response she could muster was to say, "Oh! We used to have a yard-man named Buchanan."
24 The discussion which follows is based upon *An Historian's Progress*, pp. 148-164; also *The Disruption of American Democracy*, pp. 20-40.
national elections were not coordinated as they are today, elections were far more frequent, and there was never a time when an election campaign was not in progress in at least one of the states. This meant that the excitement and the contrived arousal of the voters was a chronic condition in the political system. No intervals of political tranquility were possible. By the 1850's such chronic excitement "had become dangerous."

Further, the structure of the political system was deeply influenced by its existence within a dualistic context of federalism. The most direct consequence of this Federalism appeared in the fact that the political parties themselves were partly national parties and partly state parties. This is Nichols' fourth factor, and, commenting on the autonomous position of each state organization in the major parties, he points out that "by 1850, when there were thirty-one states there were not two parties but sixty-four." The relation of the parties at the state and national levels was almost schizophrenic, for state and national parties were dependent upon one another for success, were constantly under pressure to defer to one another, and yet different state organizations within the same National party might take antithetical position on public issues, leaving it to the national leaders to improvise frantic, makeshift formulae to hold the national party together. Often national issues were invoked in order to win elections at the state level or *vice versa*. Means at one level could serve ends at another level. Historians, who are prone to focus upon national issues and to disdain state rivalries, have, as a consequence, unconsciously exaggerated the importance of national issues, including the slavery issue, which probably did not preoccupy the minds of voters in the eighteen fifties so exclusively as most twentieth century readers imagine. It is worth noting in this connection that the very best and most recent research, such as Michael Holt's study of the formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, and the careful quantitative studies by Joel Silbey and by Thomas B. Alexander, all bear out the pioneer observations of Nichols that state parties, which, of course influenced policy on the slavery question at the national level, often owed their success within their state to issues unrelated to slavery; and that party cohesion

---

25 "There were [statewide] elections, somewhere, in every month of every year save January, February, and July." *An Historian's Progress*, p. 153.
seemed more important on more issues than sectional cohesion (or solidarity on the slavery issue), as measured by voting behavior in the House of Representatives. 26

But not only was a dualistic federalism built into the party system itself. Far more profound and far more complex was a fifth factor, namely that, whether the politicians knew it or not, they were operating a society which was federal, in an even deeper sense than the federalistic political mechanism. This society was a national one in its widely-shared commitment to the Protestant ethic, and romanticism, and I would add, to individualism; it was held together by its commitment to democracy and to a well-advanced but not yet fully dominant nationalism. But on the other hand, it was weakened by cultural incompatibilities of the New England culture and the Southern culture—incompatibilities which were heightened by the rivalries between these cultures to dominate the new areas of a rapidly expanding republic, and also by the tensions between a growing metropolitanism in the Northeast and a traditionalist parochialism in the South, and most of all by an antislavery sentiment which Southerners bitterly resented as a stigma, a brand of barbarism upon their society and an encouragement to insurrection which might destroy them. As Nichols observes, the politicians at least understood the problems of political federalism and had some sense of how to cope with them, but many did not understand the problem of cultural federalism at all. So little did they understand it that when the crisis came at last, the North could not believe that the South would really secede, and the South could not believe that the North would support a long, deadly, and devastating war to prevent secession. With reference to the complexities and intricacies of the cultural federalism, Nichols makes one of his aptest comments: the Civil War was a brothers' war, as has often been said, but "a brothers' war in which there were more than two brothers."

The sixth factor in Nichols' formulation was the recognition of the non-political elements—such as economic fluctuations, population movements and religious stirrings which impinged significantly upon the political situation, though they were not directly

part of it. The seventh was the factor of change which was bringing politics under a new dispensation which was not as reluctant as the old dispensation had been to concentrate and wield political power. The Jeffersonian generation had recognized that minimization of government and adoption of laissez-faire policies were a wonderful protection against clashes between diverse interests in the Federal system. But by 1860, there was a growing disposition to let the American Colossus use its power.

Such was the model that Nichols worked out, not even recognizing it himself in its entirety until after he had completed it. Like all models, it is open to criticism, and indeed one of its principal values is that it invites criticism. If a large panel of critics were consulted, I suppose that two criticisms could be anticipated. Some would say that the model does not provide an answer to that perennial riddle: Was the Civil War inevitable? Was the conflict irrepressible? Indeed it does not provide an answer, but to suppose that it ought to is to misapprehend the purpose of a model. The model tells rather at what point the system generated unnecessary friction (in constant elections), at what point it failed (in handling the problems of cultural federalism), and how the antagonisms in the society were either mitigated or intensified as they were translated into political terms. If a model can do this, it has done enough, and answers to riddles ought not to be required of it. Nichols says elsewhere that there "appears to be a continuing process of cultural integration and disintegration." He has looked back over a millennium in the history of England and America for evidence of this cycle. Clearly the events of 1845-1877 marked such a cycle. Perhaps this is as much as history can say.

A second criticism might be that the model does not give enough

27 An Historian's Progress, p. 148.
28 Ibid., p. 216. For some thoughtful criticisms of Nichols' approach, as applied in Blueprints for Leviathan, see review by Thomas J. Pressly in Journal of Southern History, XXX (February, 1964), 94-97.
29 Nothing demonstrates Nichols' basic commitment to history rather than the social sciences more clearly than his repeated attention to analysis over long time-spans. In addition to Blueprints for Leviathan and The Invention of American Political Parties, see his inaugural lecture at Cambridge University, The Historical Study of Anglo-American Democracy (Cambridge, 1949); his "1461-1861: The American Civil War in Perspective," in Journal of Southern History, XVI (May, 1950), 143-160; and his The Slow Evolution of American Politics (Cotton Memorial Papers: University of Texas at El Paso, August 1967).
weight to the transcendent importance of the slavery issue as an obstacle to sectional harmony. But critics who would offer this criticism might well remember that the model is a political one. One anomaly of the slavery issue is that, while the two sections disagreed deeply about slavery, the two political parties disagreed only marginally in what they were prepared to do about slavery—they had different proposals for the territories, where the issue was perhaps fictitious, but they were both pledged to leave slavery unmolested in the states, where the issue was real. Perhaps this anomaly was part of the politicians' inability to handle cultural federalism.

In any case an extended critique is beyond the scope of this paper. The exact degree of perfection of the model was less important than the fact that a model had been constructed. Nichols had moved into political history when it was in danger of degenerating into a grab bag of isolated events, strung together chronologically, garnished with personalities, and spiced with anecdote. When he left it, it had been revitalized by the recognition that political history must be analyzed as a process, involving fundamental interactions between various factors in the society, and that, as the medium for the functional use of power, politics is as crucial as any process in the society. He had not, of course, done this single-handed. So many historians in the last half-century have contributed to the revitalization of political history that it would be invidious to name a few of them. But Nichols was certainly one of the earliest and is certainly one of the most important. In his autobiography he modestly depicts himself as a passive witness who had “passed through a cycle of historiography. I had started when the end of political and constitutional interest seemed at hand, and was now [1967] working in an atmosphere of the renaissance of a new, more comprehensive, and more analytic political history.” But in fact, Nichols was never for a moment a mere spectator of this change. He was in fact as important as any other single figure in bringing about the cycle which he describes himself as having “passed through.” It was a crucial cycle in American historiography, and though Nichols' scholarship is important in a number of dimensions, perhaps its greatest importance is in its major contribution to the rehabilitation of American political history.

30 An Historian's Progress, p. 239.