TODAY Roy F. Nichols is widely recognized as one of America's leading political historians. But, judged by all the measurements one can use to appraise a long and fruitful career, he is much more than that. He is, and always was, a man of his world, a receptor carefully attuned to the swirling and bewildering intellectual currents which characterize his age. And always he reacted within the framework of his career as a student and teacher of history. This framework, by his own definition, was by no means a narrow one, for he conceived of history as a broad functional discipline intended to promote, at all levels of society, a fuller understanding of man's complex behavior. Although history, as he insists over and over again, should be written on the highest intellectual plane, it should never be so esoteric as to fail of utility in a workaday society that is so much in need of the contributions of one steeped in the methods and philosophy peculiar to the practitioner of history. Always, in his view, the writer of history, combining the best talents of the humanist and the scientist, should play a leading role in creating and reflecting intellectual tendencies and developments. His concern with these matters is well illustrated by the numerous pertinent articles he contributed to scholarly journals.

These essays about history were interspersed throughout a span of almost fifty years during which he continued to write substantial and influential works of history. They seemed to mark certain periods of summary and departure for him, and for us they serve as guideposts to the interpretive and analytical trails he followed in his major works. And, of course, they continually mirror the patterns and questions of the times from which they emerged. Where there were no discernible patterns, usually the case, he sought some means of explanation and offered sensible approaches to the truth for the guidance of his fellow craftsmen.

In 1933, for example, Nichols was much concerned with the
effects on the intellectual springs of history writing and teaching induced by the staggering implications of new developments in physics and mathematics. After a brief discussion of Einstein’s views on relativity and Bohr’s theory of Complementarity he commented on their possible consequences, vis à vis social change and the need to adjust historical methods and the teaching of history to a world caught up in the new science. It seemed to him that in the “methods of teaching there should be less of science, more of impression, less of reading, more of action, we should try to convey the spirit rather than teach the letter. History should be presented as a method of approach to social problems rather than as a contact course divorced from life.” In short, the past was alive, and therefore a fit subject for lively people.

Over the years he never lost interest in the question of the social uses and functions of written history, a problem, in today’s idiom, of “relevance.” A decade later, in 1942, concerned with the emotional stress induced by the Second World War, he noted the conflict between the historian-scientist’s obligations to tell the truth about the past and society’s inclination to color that truth in accordance with certain dictates of social expediency. Society was disturbed, for example, when its cherished heroes lost dimension in the hands of the “debunkers.” The historian was in a difficult situation, one for which he was not sufficiently prepared. He did not possess “the intellectual certainty, the well-established ethics which could guide him in the contest between his recently acquired scientific principles and the demands of society.”

Nichols’ solution to the problem would not sacrifice truth by lending it a verisimilitude more acceptable to society; instead he would give it a broader compass, one based on a search for, and understanding of, the universal and diverse springs of human action. In working their way out of their problems historians should avoid interpreting history from narrow, specialized points of view, such as the political or economic. These, in Nichols’ opinion, had become labels, and unfortunately historians had used these specialties as licenses to exclusiveness, “as though these interpretations were equally significant for all places and periods.

1 See Roy F. Nichols, “History Teaching in this Intellectual Crisis,” The Historical Outlook, XXIV (November, 1933), 357-363.
... The various phases of human behavior have never existed in a vacuum, but have evolved simultaneously and individually. The stream of history refuses to follow through these artificially charted channels. Furthermore, although he served his apprenticeship at a time when historians were lauding objectivity, as exemplified by a "scientific" approach which required close attention to the smallest threads in time's fabric, he countered with a plea for the virtues of subjectivity. Truly, historians were people writing about people, a fact that could be ignored only at the peril of serious misinterpretations. Research was important, but more important were the historian's personal frame of reference, the quality of his mind, and the way in which he viewed the world around him.

Here, then, was a "political historian" recommending the pursuit of goals that lay beyond the confines of specialization. It was an historical approach to truth that would take the teller of tales beyond the arts of narrative and lead the fact-gatherer up into the realm of synthesis. In this connection he would later say that the reality and meaning of any epoch can best be understood by the historian who is capable of scaling the obstructions of massive fact, and who had the perceptive faculties to grasp the thought and spirit of the epoch he is studying.

To the unregenerate purist in the field of political history, or to those unfamiliar with the broad scope of his work, Nichols' views may border on the heretical. But to those who have observed "A Historian's Progress" over the years it is clear that these very ideas, this frame of reference, if you will, began to germinate not long after the appearance of his first published book, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854. That volume was written within the tradition of political history then extant. But always receptive to social and intellectual change, Nichols began to see that the traditionalists were not getting to the roots of American institutional growth.

In the heyday of nationalist historical writing, that is, in the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the first twenty or thirty years of this one, several of its notable practitioners

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2 Ibid., 338.
3 Ibid., 338.
contributed solidly to our understanding of the constitutional and political forces behind this country's astonishing rise to power. On the assumption that the means Americans adopted to solve their problems was informed and conditioned by an innate genius for government, by a willingness to compromise, and by a recognition of the necessity of resorting to ballots instead of bullets, the devotees of political history stressed the devices whereby solutions to the abrasions of society could be obtained. It was only natural, therefore, given this "consensus" framework, that they should have become preoccupied with operative mechanics, with elections, conventions, caucuses, deals, adjustments, and all the other machinery which gave the processes of governing a practical validity. The questions they raised were fundamental. How could a people exposed to a welter of centrifugal forces—ethnical, religious, social, economic, and geographic—manage to create and maintain a union strong enough to separate from the British Empire and go on to become, in a relatively short time, an international power? The answers they obtained were in the best tradition of the Founding Fathers, who seemed to demonstrate and exemplify to the highest degree the ability of reasonable men to find political solutions to a morass of problems.

In this school of historiography Nichols saw much that was praiseworthy, but he did feel impelled at times to enter caveats against certain tendencies inherent within it. As a pragmatist, one who recognized the utility of history and sought to apply it at all levels, he repeatedly urged the desirability of digging as deeply as possible into the sources—all kinds of sources. Here were the materials of narrative construction, but mere accumulation resulted in sterility unless the facts gathered were subjected to the reflections of a perceptive mind and meanings useful to society uncovered. Furthermore, in their devotion to panoramic history, i.e., to a broad coverage of economic, cultural, and political activities, the nationalists had unfortunately neglected the history of communities, "where social forces germinate." By concentrating on surface manifestations rather than on the local springs of social change, they had actually become "a school of inversion." Countering this, and obviously influenced by the awesome discoveries of nuclear physics—he was writing in 1948—Nichols advised historians to substitute "the microcosms of community
behavior” for the “nationalistic macrocosms” that had been so long in vogue. But what techniques, methods or “frames of reference” should the historian employ to achieve meaningful generalizations? In the same year, 1948, in his inaugural lecture as Visiting Professor of American History and Institutions in the University of Cambridge he envisioned written history in its broadest scope. In that lecture, while recommending increased attention to the Anglo-American democratic experience as a fruitful area for the exploration of institutional growth, he stressed the need for a fresh study of the two-party system, an accomplishment which was almost unique to the history of these two peoples. The writing about that system, he thought, had been distorted by over-emphasis on glittering personalities, spectacular events, and the dialectics of political debate. These did not get to the heart of the matter, a basic comprehension of popular attitudes. This could best be obtained by using the techniques “involved in the study of cultural history.”

Eighteen years later, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, Nichols returned to this theme. Here he advocated the use of a “culture” concept, an all-embracing intellectual and methodological vehicle for social examination whose vital purpose was intelligent synthesis and generalization. The culture of any society could be found in its “design.” By that he meant a society’s “plan of operation, the force or influence that organizes it and keeps within it a semblance of recognizable structure and order.”

5 Roy F. Nichols, “Postwar Reorientations of Historical Thinking,” American Historical Review, LIV (October, 1948), 80, 82.
During the years intervening between those two addresses, Nichols' major works illustrated, and were informed by, his views of a cultural concept of civilization. In his autobiography, *A Historian's Progress*, he says the idea grew out of his experience as an instructor in Contemporary Civilization early in his career at Columbia University. It would seem, though, to have reached its fuller implications during the decades preceding the Second World War, and to have come to practical fruition in the years following that event.

Nichols' doctoral dissertation, published in 1923 as *The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854*, is generally thought of as being a study that was traditional in both outlook and development. This is not surprising in view of the condition of political history writing at the time. Had readers and reviewers been gifted with foresight, however, they might have noted that the young historian, while marshalling relevant facts in proper scientific fashion, was not averse to offering his opinion on the meaning of those facts. In a summary chapter concisely and confidently titled "Why?" he ascribed the breakdown of the machine to lack of understanding of the force of public opinion, insensitivity to the "rising tide of moral indignation" in the country and similar sociological factors. Thus he not only flouted scientific canons by editorializing a bit, but he found the most important answers to his questions in the imponderables of human behavior.

Interest in the people and the social currents which together animated the Democratic machine led Nichols to undertake his next project, the biography of Franklin Pierce (published in 1931). Reviewers spoke with appreciation of the author's "scholarly standards," of his literary style—"vivid even racy"—of the "wealth of detail on the daily life of the time" he added to flesh out his narrative, on the "illuminating passages of social description" which made the whole more meaningful. Once again, Nichols provided his readers with a concluding statement. Pierce, he thought, had been a rather mediocre man, one who was satisfied that he could find useful solutions even to difficult problems after a look at their surfaces. Because of this, he failed completely to understand the "complex nature of the conflict between the social forces" then beginning to divide the nation. The divisive potentials...

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of trade associations, lobbies, organized propaganda, of suspicion, fear, resentment, of thwarted ambitions, of the ideas current in the newspapers, and spoken from platform and pulpit failed to impress the President. But not his biographer.

Any reviewer essaying a retrospective account of Nichols' work cannot help remarking that several features characteristic of his later writings are also evident in this, his first major study as an established scholar. The subject matter—political affairs in the United States in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War—is either the theme or provides the taking off point for the argument he advances in most of his later books. The literary quality of his style; his ability to set forth the details of a complex situation so that the reader will understand what happened and why things turned out as they did are noted time and again by reviewers, whether they are journalists writing for a newspaper, or historians preparing their comments for a scholarly publication. All are present in Franklin Pierce.

Following the publication of the biography of Pierce, Nichols' explorations of various facets of the history of the expanding United States produced articles for the American Historical Review and other journals. At the same time he was stating his philosophy of history and history writing in essays published in The Historical Outlook, the Proceedings of the Middle States Association of History and Social Science Teachers, in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, the Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, and in the American Historical Review. During these years, Nichols also wrote three textbooks on American history, with Jeannette P. Nichols as his collaborator, contributed to several cooperative projects and wrote countless reviews for one or another of the historical quarterlies. These last reflected his two chief interests—mid nineteenth-century American political history, and the art and craft of the historian. An editorial, "Our Unfinished Business," published in 1948 in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, documents Nichols' views about history and what makes for good history writing. In it he stated his belief that political history is of "paramount importance" because it is by political means that society makes the adjustments continually required as power shifts its base from one group to another. Nichols was not advocating a
return to the sterile story of institutions, constitutions and laws, nor to studies of "the unique and spectacular," or of the "great personalities." He was proposing a much more comprehensive kind of political history—one which would examine the origins of ideas and institutions, look into the political behavior of the electorate, how they vote, how they are managed, how they make their wants and opinions felt, assess the action of social and cultural forms, the emotional climate in which a government works, the location of power, and the way that power is used. All this thought and writing published in these many and diverse places were preparation for the Pulitzer Prize winning *The Disruption of American Democracy.*

Recurrently in the history of nations there come times when conflicting social, political, and economic elements reach so critical a stage that the safety and general welfare of society are endangered. The existence of government and even the nation itself may be put in serious jeopardy. At such times the surging forces of change, if they are to be given orderly direction, require prompt evaluation, reappraisal, and firm decision. The recognition of this imperative and the quality of thought and imagination brought to bear by leadership on problem solving can be fateful in their consequences.

In the history of this country there are a few such periods when the leaders wisely assessed the trends and lessons of the past and came up with guiding principles and sound charts for the future. An outstanding example is represented in the creation and ratification of the Constitution of 1787. A documentary recapitulation of the past in terms of current urgencies it channeled new directions and stemmed a divisiveness that had threatened the union.

Seventy years later, with the country blundering into Civil War, the hard-headed realists who had created that organic structure were long in their respected graves. In the years between their successors had produced no fundamental architectonic innovations or alterations; instead they had skirted issues and sought compromises. They had tried to buy time. But by 1856 time was running out—and James Buchanan, not George Washington, was "the man of the hour." What great men had put together lesser men would put asunder.

* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948.)
Nichols' task in *The Disruption of American Democracy* was to explain the reasons behind the failure of Americans to bridge the gaps that had opened in the National structure. While focusing his attention on the Democratic party and its inability to meet the deepening crisis, he encompasses within his plan of attack a wide range of American "attitudes" which he regards as being most influential in conditioning political behavior. Then, by viewing men and events within and against this attitudinal diversity, he produced a work that would be a model for the historian who sought to look beneath the surface of political action.

Nichols' appointments as Visiting Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge gave him another opportunity to pursue his interest in the genesis of democratic institutions, particularly the cultural complex from which both the institutions themselves and the ideas, emotions, needs, that called them into being had emerged. Legal and constitutional historians had examined colonial charters minutely, comparing their form and phraseology to English borough charters and to the articles of incorporation describing the rights, privileges and obligations of the trading companies that carried on England's overseas commerce. Much had been made of the structure of these documents but much less time or thought had been expended on the prevailing intellectual and emotional climate of sixteenth-century England. Yet it was this climate that informed the thinking of the men who, once they had arrived in the New World, were to transform pieces of paper into living institutions.

Perhaps it took a truly religious man, one who was also deeply interested in how that political animal, man, behaves, to develop the relationship between the ideas debated by the frequenters of the White Horse Inn in Cambridge, or those underlying the Book of Discipline approved in 1589 by a synod held at St. John's College, and the democratic implications of the Mayflower Compact.¹⁰

The primarily religious influences emanating from the Norwich area were, in Nichols' opinion, "to open a new epoch in political behavior." The East Anglicans were investigating "a new concept of the relations of the individual to society—including the nature

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and power of government and the source of its authority.” This was particularly important since in England the relationships between secular and religious spheres of action were blurred by the fact that the parish was not only a center for worship but was also an instrument of local government with vestry and church wardens responsible for the levying of rates and the dispensing of charity. The religious ferment of the Reformation, therefore, not only produced a “reformed” doctrine but also led to changes in attitudes toward participation in church affairs. For example, The Book of Discipline, mentioned above, decreed that “in all the greater affairs of the church . . . nothing may be conducted without the knowledge and consent of the church,” that is, of the congregation. In this statement, as Nichols noted, “lies one of the germs of American democracy.” The Puritan movement within the Church of England trained men in organization, in the dissemination—often by use of underground techniques—of propaganda, in lobbying. It spread a concept of a society of equal men, stressed the worth of the individual, and the need for a government which had some reference to the popular will and some respect for social justice. Not the least important development was the establishment of the notion of the usefulness of a “partnership between government and men willing to venture much for the commonweal.”

The close association, in spite of their official separation, between government and religion in the United States, continued to occupy Nichols’ attention. He expanded his ideas in a pair of lectures delivered at Rice University and published in 1959 under the title, Religion and American Democracy. In the first of these lectures, Nichols remarked on the variety of religious influences abroad in the colonies—Puritan, Huguenot and Anglican, those brought by the Quakers and the German sects, Catholic ideas, found particularly in the southwest, Deistic notions and those spread by the Great Awakening. He concluded: “When a people, the pattern of whose thought and action was so moralistic and pietistic and so dominated by denomination and creed, created self-government, they were bound to impose upon the pattern of this government the spirit if not the form of their religion. The

11 Ibid., 8.
12 Ibid., 22-29.
peculiar circumstances of the migration and settlement together with the character of so many of these citizens of Zion decreed that this religious influence should be democratic, perhaps in spite of itself."13

Religion, principally of the Protestant variety, continued to be a major force in shaping American society through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The steeples of the thousands of churches visible across the land provided town and village with their most impressive landmarks. Only the courthouses of the county towns were equally imposing. The omnipresent churches, the sound of their bells, and the authority of their leaders in their several communities so permeated the atmosphere that no one “even the indifferent or the antagonistic” could fail to feel their presence. To this direct influence of Christianity on American society. Nichols suggested the addition of several ancillary ones—an educational system with a strong moralistic bias, the general poor health of the population which fixed the attention of most on the life hereafter, and pressure for social reforms, in themselves a by-product of Arminian theology. Gathering all these threads together, Nichols developed a concept of a democratic society that was activated and controlled by a moral imperative. This was, in his opinion, the unique element in American culture.

In this essay as in many other of his post-World War II writings, Dr. Nichols makes reference to the “troubled” present and with eloquence worthy of a Puritan theologian calls his readers to “summon once again this century-old sense of dedication and moral purpose to aid them as they combat the enemy within and without.” The ability of American democracy to adjust to a changing world and effectively meet the needs of a society in flux is a cardinal principle of Nichols’ philosophy. “It may be profitably maintained,” he wrote, “that it would be in the interest of the general welfare if American citizens could continue to hold their rights and responsibilities of self-government as sacred, that those to whom the duties of government be entrusted should feel that theirs is a trust to be carried out in a spirit of democratic dedication, that they should believe that the purity of government is of the highest concern to society. Neither religion

nor government should ever be taken for granted. If they are, if there is merely a vague faith but no living zeal for the cause of liberty and self-government, it will wither and may even die.” For him the “Religion of American Democracy” is a religion indeed.

Once again ideas explored on the lecture platform or in articles for scholarly journals laid the foundation for several major books. *Blueprints for Leviathan: American Style*, begins with a review of the English background of American political thought and action then develops the thesis that Americans, having a peculiar talent for preserving liberty with order, manage to keep their institutions elastic by document making, by compromise instead of confrontation. The reader is invited to consider a series of documents fundamental to the organic laws of the United States from the Declaration of Independence through the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, the Northwest Ordinance, the Compromises of 1820 and 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Confederate Constitution, to the changes made in the Constitution of the United States after the Civil War. Nichols discusses the problems each of these documents was designed to meet—some territorial, others political, cultural or economic. Both the problem and the documentary solution are related to the changing societies out of which they grew. Using the techniques of the behavioral sciences, and adding his ability to synthesize, his gift for the trenchant phrase, and his knowledge of men and events gained over a lifetime of research, he tells a story of action, of change, and of the shifting balance of power within the institutional framework of American government.

For this book and the *Invention of the American Political Parties* which similarly synthesizes his views on the slow evolution of these structures, Nichols has been praised because of his use of new historical techniques, his references to ecology, to the religious climate of the age, the ideas of the demographers and psychologists. He has also been criticized for failing to do these very things. Apparently the difference lay in the viewpoint of the reviewer. Nichols did think that quantification, the current shibboleth of social scientists, had some weaknesses. Tables do not

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capture the imagination, he said, and without audience interest no work will “have the impact which it should.” His own particular interest was “in the mechanism of political action” as it was demonstrated through the “less visible” operations of party machinery with regard to patronage, nomination of candidates for office, management of party funds and the “activities of those managers who never hold office.” All this must be done with a due sense of “literary responsibility,” he maintained, for history must be read if it is to continue to be a useful tool in a democratic society.

The preparation of this little essay on some of Professor Nichols’ historiographical ideas, a privilege for which we are grateful, was made easier, albeit unknowingly, by the subject himself. So often his articles on the need for new approaches to history, as has been pointed out, preceded a book-length illustration of them. Would that all historians were so obliging, thus easing the path of those who assess their work.