History, the Key to the Magic Door*

Ten years have passed since I spoke at the joint meeting in Washington of these two associations—ten years which, I hope, have increased my intellectual humility, have made me less certain of the finality of the things I once felt so sure about; have increased my awareness of the developing truth. And surely such a change should be beneficial. Without willingness to amend one’s judgments as further facts appear, or philosophies suggest their meaning, knowledge becomes little more than sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. But you have, I fear, chosen an uncertain trumpet to sound before the walls of Jericho, uncertain among other reasons because from the outset my approach to the study and use of history has been unorthodox. The lack of early indoctrination in professional methods and procedures has caused me to stub my toe a thousand times at least, it seemed, in researching and writing history.

In the early twenties the mechanics of national party politics had considerable fascination for me, but its exploration soon suggested that, for all the glitter, this was a thin layer of our national life. Politicians often are more interested in the techniques than in the effects of their endeavors. Hence, in order to understand the forces which make for change in America, one needs a broader base than the methods and personalities which control national committees, conventions and campaigns.

In line with Lord Acton’s prescient suggestion that one can gain a better understanding of history by writing than by reading it, I undertook to describe the career of Andrew Johnson, the plebeian President from Tennessee. The interpretation of President Johnson’s stormy career increased my suspicions of the theory of the inevitability of events, and led me to doubt that the American Civil War had been preordained. It seemed unbelievable that, if freedom had

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been secured for the Russian serf by the stroke of the Czar’s pen, it
could only have been gained for the American slave at bayonet
point. Could we not have escaped the “War Between the States”?-
Therefore I undertook a reexamination of the forces which flamed
into war at Sumter, and came to the conclusion that Stephen A.
Douglas, perhaps, had come the closest to finding a workable formula
for avoiding that conflict by cushioning the shock of change from
servitude to freedom. In all probability, such a program would have
“worked”—the tragedy could have been averted.

This feeling that the past had not been decreed by fate—and that
tragedies, whether political, social or economic, might have been
avoided had there been a little different judgment, or compatibility,
or even weather—played its part in my subsequent endeavors to
cite the example of the influence of variables in the coming of the
American Civil War. Surely the career of Douglas affords a striking
example that, given a little different turn of the wheel of chance, a
little more private forbearance and public virtue among the sooth-
sayers and tribunes of the fifties, that war might not have come.

The example of the Civil War naturally raises the question whether
the present World War was inescapable. Before suggesting the pos-
sible evitability of today’s overlapping global conflicts, however, it
is well to express a fear about what World War II may do to our
customary techniques of historical investigation. It is, perhaps,
fitting for one in whom experience has developed the keen desire to
see the document itself—to note its interlineations and erasures, or
the altered date—to express the fear that the mounting documentary
records the government is gathering on America at war represent
about as technically frustrating a problem as has faced the American
historian since public records were first opened to the craft.

How will any one historian be able to deal with these records?
Their very bulk seems to call for a mass-production analysis of the
data out of which to find clues to any of the riddles of our times.
Until such a cooperative procedure is perfected, the mountains of
documentary records now accumulating at Washington, at White-
hall, at Chungking and the Kremlin, at the nth power of the peace-
time pace, may move a fearful handicap to tomorrow’s seekers of the
grain of truth. They will need X-ray eyes, no doubt, if they are to
make any speed at finding the facts of real importance in the
archives of this war of wars. That is, until there shall be invented some great brass brain which can weigh historic facts in long tons, and calculate the tides of the presidential mind.

Yet there had better be "gold in them thar hills" of paperwork, because the new technology of transport and communication may diminish the availability of documentary sources of the type which in the past have provided the keys to many mysteries. Today's Chief of State does not need to add the postscript, "Burn this letter," for he can take plane to Teheran for a personal discussion with Stalin, or almost anywhere for one with Churchill. Heads of foreign offices have their own walkie-talkie code for trans-Atlantic conversations. Chiefs of Staff of Britain and America foregather in a building on Constitution Avenue for unrecorded conversations. Necessarily there are fewer written records of today's decisions of haute politique, a lack seemingly uncompensated by warehouses full of operational details.

Eighty years ago, each night before retiring Father Gideon Welles did his duty to his diary and so did Bates and Chase. Where are the diary writers of this present administration? When the New Deal was young and its processes of policy formation most explosive, it was my custom, when visiting Washington, to urge high-placed friends to note each night for posterity's sake the nuances of the day. Jim Farley did give the idea heed, some others started, but soon began to skip it—the pace was much too swift, and in an age of stenographers and dictaphones, it was something of a wrench to take pen in hand and write in a little book. Twenty years from now, or a century, those who then plow the fields of history will be wanting to know what Stalin said to Cordell Hull in their three-hour conference in the Kremlin, and again to Roosevelt and Churchill at Teheran—of both of which, we are told, there are no notes.

These forebodings of breakers ahead in historiography have not been introduced to derogate useful study and good research—far from it. But just such difficulties as these should accentuate our realization that the historian has other purposes than compiling facts; it is more important for him, through representative selections of discrete data, to find the relations of forces, the elements of influence and antipathy, the springs of cause and the oddments of effect. That is to say, historical thinking rather than historical learn-
ing is the chief contribution the historian can make to this and suc-
ceeding generations. As Lord Acton so well put it, the main thing
“is not the art of accumulating material, but the nobler art of inter-
preting it.” The factual masses, confusing in their prolixity, make
this even more of an imperative today. The need is for an energetic
understanding of trends, the capturing of sequences and significances,
the qualitative appraisal of the relevant proportions of the variables
which chiefly determine the life of man.

It should be emphasized that the things that matter most are the
things we can do something about. These are not such constants as
the speed of light or atomic density, which we cannot change by
sweat of brow or flash of brain. They are, rather, the variables, by
taking thought of which and attending to, men often have changed
the course of history. Neglect of due attention to these elements that
are susceptible of being cabined, cribbed, and confined has resulted
in some of man’s worst backsets; while the proper application of
understanding judgment has led to some of his greatest victories.

There is no need to labor the point about the Civil War having
been as much the result of malice that might have been offset, and
mischance that could have been avoided, as it was of inexorable
forces determined on the spilling of brothers’ blood. The present
world holocaust has, back of it an equally imposing array of "if’s.”
Suppose the Prinkipo conference had been held in 1919; or a greater
Lodge had led America into the League, or a more persuasive Wilson
had counterbalanced the Senate’s veto by a vote of one-third and
one rule. Consider the altered train of affairs if Lowden the states-
man instead of Harding the typical Elk had entered the White House
in March, 1921; or if the Great Engineer had vetoed Smoot-Hawley
and gone off gold when Britain did. Yet time was when each one of
these now absurd suggestions belonged to the Kingdom of Might
Have Been.

The war itself had elsewhere its beginning, and came after a chain
of events the breaking of any link whereof might have destroyed the
Juggernaut. None watched Japan’s aggression in Manchuria more
closely than Il Duce, lusting for Ethiopia. Nor did the experimental
Hitler send his legions west of the Rhine until he had seen France’s
sabotage of sanctions, the mighty engine of the League. The private
journals and secret documents of pre-1940 France throw much light
on the debates which followed this flagrant violation of an explicit provision of the Treaty of Versailles. The French had their Maginot Line, and the mass power of their army, together with schism and defeatism in General Staff as well as cabinet. Their debate was far from finished when Hitler's advancing forces reached their boundary. Militarily, the French then had the power to throw the Nazis out. In Berlin in the summer of 1936, William E. Dodd and others told me Hitler's men had marched with orders to retreat if the French resisted.

A further question mark about this war: What could have led the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor? Consider the situation that preceded it. Western Europe was in German hands from the Pyrenees through the Pripet Marshes, and the Wehrmacht was at Moscow's gates. Britain had just lost her campaigns in Yugoslavia and Greece, was not too much at ease in Libya—and the sinkings of her merchant ships were about twice as great as the tonnage of new bottoms being launched in Britain and America.

We ourselves were in that strange state known as Total Defense. We had taken long steps—had gone through our own soft civil war—the emotional battle between the Committee to Defend America through Aid to the Allies and the America First Committee—the Neutrality act was gone, lend-lease had been voted and put in service, and we called ourselves the Arsenal of Democracy. But an arsenal, do not forget, is not moving armor, and its spirit not that of desperate men who must venture all that their country and their world may live. There was little more than a thin stream to the beleaguered British—and trickle describes the unloadings at Vladivostok, Bander Shapur and Archangel. Goods and ships were lacking for greater aid. Tomorrow's historian, equipped with time's perspective, may conclude that if "Total Defense" and "Arsenal of Democracy" had gone on two years longer, Hitler would have won his war.

Then Japan attacked. This catalyzed America—Leviathan came to life. This was the beginning of the end of the Axis. Why did Tokyo attack? The answer no doubt rests on variables which had more effect on the immediate future of the world than any of the constants of the day.

The field of science, too, affords important illustrations of the im-
portance of chance in discovery and development of weapons for life. There is, for instance, penicillin, that amazing antagonist of bacteria which, given the chance, will kill instantly and help to restore people at the point of death to the bloom of health and hope. One Professor Fleming was making a culture one day of bacteria—this was in a British Laboratory in 1929—and he came across one saucer that showed a small area in which a growth of yeast had inhibited the growth of bacteria. Fleming himself was too occupied with other professional duties to give adequate time to the work—but he did keep the culture alive. Ten years later the Rockefeller Institute of New York sent an American bacteriologist to this same British laboratory, but in quite a different field of work. He met Fleming, the latter told him the story of the penicillin, the American reported it to the Rockefeller people, who took a flyer with $2500. This started the research in earnest, enough penicillin was produced to permit a thorough trial. It worked and the result is the greatest destroyer of decay and death that has been developed so far.

Suppose Fleming had not been so curious about this little area of dead bacilli on one of a hundred plates; suppose, again, that the visiting scientist had gone to a different British laboratory; or had it chanced that the Rockefeller official in charge of this particular field of work had been moody when this hint came across the waters, and the $2500 had not been sent. In any of these events the development of this amazing foe to disease would have been delayed, perhaps forgotten. Today it is being grown in tanks six stories high, thousands of lives are being saved by it and the possibilities are for millions. And yet this great advance had to run the gauntlet of enormous chance every step of the way.

Let us now consider together the motives which lead men to the study of history—and also the purpose and duty of its pursuit. The motives that carry men into the study of history, of course, differ greatly. Some seek little more than self-amusement just as they play a game of cards. Others read much and study some just to be able to talk, to shine in conversation. Then there is a considerable group which would seem animated by little more than intellectual curiosity, which is laudable in itself—and most useful, within limits. Man is a staring as well as a timid creature, because human nature has provided us with curiosity to offset the fear she also endowed us with. This
curiosity does excite the industry of our minds, which is a gain, but it is to be doubted that the satisfaction of the tendency to stare is or should be the chief, much less the sole object of the application of man's faculties.

Be this as it may, the study of history may serve to make us mere antiquaries, or men of show of scholarship, or pedants prating of methods rather than purposes and ends. This, of course, is not history's fault, but that of the individual historian. Knowledge is a worthy end in itself, but it is even worthier if joined with the purpose of being used to help mankind along life's path. Knowledge of history in the particular can lend itself to the general good. Every man who can read and think can undertake its study; and what is in itself among the most agreeable sort of learning can become the most useful application of our minds.

All of us realize, of course, the importance of giving due heed to the strength of the bad cause, and to the weakness of the good; we are aware that error ministers to truth, and that truth eventually prevails. We seek to judge talent at its best and character at its worst. We know the truth of Acton's flashing phrase, "Power corrupts—absolute power corrupts absolutely" and are on the outlook for evidence, to warn the people. All of us are frightened by the mere surface of events, because all too often it is unmeaning and unsuggestive. We find it imperative to test each link of the chain of events, to be sure that the truth does band together. We are aware of the need for an energetic understanding of sequence and significance; a politician finds it fatal to lack that sense; and the historian, who is the politician looking backward, can easily be ruined by blindness to why things happen a certain way.

These things, however, are within the realm of methods, of ways and means to satisfy the curiosity about the particular world one studies. I have come to feel that there is an equally fine and noble companion purpose to that of truth. One which, like truth, is one of the great moving abstractions which defies the ordinary definition and can only be defined in reflections of itself. This companion purpose for the study of history is the benefiting of the living generation by exhibiting to them the splendors and miseries of those who have preceded. If we know not how to profit by the example of those who have gone before us, all our learning, all our research and publication
is naught but Dead Sea fruit. The past need be no obstacle and burden—knowledge of it is the surest emancipation for man's mind and spirit in the living world.

Let me recall Bolingbroke's shining phrase that history is philosophy teaching by examples. The school of example is the world, and as he says:

We are not only passengers or sojourners in this world. Our guides are often ignorant, often unfaithful. By the map of the country which history spreads before us, we may learn, if we please, to guide ourselves.

In our journey through it we are beset on every side. We are besieged sometimes even in our strongest holds. Terrors and temptations, conducted by the passions of other men, assault us; and our own passions that correspond with these, betray us. History is the collection of the journals of those who have traveled through the same country and been exposed to the same accidents—and their good and their ill success are equally instructive.

History can instruct us in private and public virtue. It can point the path of judgment, and portray wisdom's rewards. The study and use of history should be man's key to the magic door of a more abounding and rewarding life. And we historians must seek and use the key.

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