Conference on American History

"Do We Need a 'New History' of American Political Democracy?"

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Reporters
Unfinished Business
An Editorial

The history of American political democracy is still unfinished business. Failure to devote more professional effort to the problems still unsolved may have unfortunate consequences. Such was the judgment of some two score historians and social scientists met in midwinter conference at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

From the classic days of Bancroft, America's first great historian, and for three quarters of a century thereafter, the political theme was predominant in our national history. Political and constitutional achievement filled the pages of the textbooks in the schools and colleges. When the graduate schools were organized late in the nineteenth century, the new seminars busied themselves with research in the history of political institutions.

In the early years of the twentieth century the interest of American historians gained broader horizons. The growth of social science made available more adequate knowledge of human nature and historians became increasingly aware of the complexity of the patterns woven into the seamless web of history.

Economic, social, cultural, intellectual history appeared, each with new concepts and new types of sources. As these various inter-
ests evolved, they encouraged historians to departmentalize, to become involved in ever greater fragmentation; naturally they diverted more and more research and teaching interest from what might be called the mother-field of political history. This situation was in part due to the attractiveness of novelty and to the desire to secure more adequate understanding of the processes of history, but it was also due, in good part, to the realization that political history had become formalized and narrow, dealing largely with surface phenomena rather than with basic questions. Furthermore, there was a feeling implied and sometimes expressed that the work in political history had been sufficient in quantity, that little more of consequence could be learned, and that the other, newer interests were on the whole more important.

This trend was perhaps inevitable, but it should now be arrested. The present war of ideologies finds American democracy facing hostile forces which are trying many weapons including the potent one of propaganda. Because scholars and public alike have been too content with a superficial and careless concept of democracy and have accepted a simple and uninforming story of its evolution and operation, they are hardly equipped with the understanding necessary to provide the counterpropaganda which will withstand these subtle and surreptitious or openly brazen assaults. For we cannot make adequate counterattacks if we know too little about our own ideology and next to nothing about its real relationship to other political systems in western civilization.

Furthermore, as has been occasionally implied or boldly stated, man has seemingly entered upon a new epoch in his history, an epoch with different meaning, one in which old events take on a new significance which must be discovered. Society must constantly make new adjustments; the reshuffling of the cards of power is continuous. Because these adjustments and this redistribution of power are accomplished by political means, political history is assuming a commanding importance.

Fortunately, new tools and techniques are available for the political historian. In the first place tremendous masses of data have been created and accumulated. These at first blush might seem prohibitive in their very mass, but the historian and his brethren in the social sciences are learning how to handle mountains of data. The microfilm
makes it possible for the historian to transport much material to his study. Sampling and statistical processes, including computing machines and punch cards, make for short cuts in coverage. Then, from such fields as social anthropology and social psychology he can secure the means of a much deeper understanding of the intricacies of human behavior. He can, therefore, approach the problems of political behavior much more realistically and with a greater chance of discovering the truth.

Much better work can be accomplished with these new tools; and it is needed. A review of the great mass of the political historian’s past labors reveals serious faults. There has been a preoccupation with the unique and spectacular, with great personalities. In the study of American political history there has been too great a concentration on the national, the constitutional, and the theoretical. Much time has been spent in analyzing political debates, in arranging ideas according to theoretical schema, and in concentrating on what one might call the shadowboxing of political debate. In so doing, basic research in political behavior has been neglected.

We now have a clearer concept of what political history should be. We realize that the history of American political democracy is the history of the American people and of one of its greatest preoccupations—its practice of the complex art of self-government. This preoccupation has been conditioned by an ancient tradition, a tremendously ramified social expansion, and a superb pride in the excellence and the unique and enlightened nature of the creation. The great interest has been manifested on two levels, one local, the other national. It has worked through a party system which, like the government it was designed to operate, has been federal. The party system has been mechanized. The government has been organized functionally to make and interpret law and to administer the processes of government provided by legislatures, courts, and customs. This government has kept in constant touch with a changing society, influencing the changes and even more influenced by them. It has been closely related to all the social, economic, and intellectual changes surrounding it and to world-wide changes as well.

In this midwinter conference, those present considered the shortcomings of the history of American political democracy in the light of this more realistic conceptual structure. In the course of the dis-
cussions the nature of the unfinished business was charted in somewhat the following fashion.

(1) **Origins.** American democracy is nearly three hundred and fifty years old and was influenced by an institutional experience much older. Yet there has been all too little work done on either the English political experience prior to 1607, or on the American experimental years down to 1776. In other words, there has been a concentration on the last half of the story without the background knowledge necessary for the understanding of the later days. Even though political democracy as such seems largely the product of post-Revolutionary experience, the accuracy of this assumption is questioned by students of the earlier period.

(2) **Basic political behavior.** The prevailing preoccupation with national politics and national constitutional development has left unreported many of the basic facts of political behavior. We have no adequate history of voting, of electoral procedures, of nominating devices, of qualifications for holding office, of how parties developed and are managed. We know something of national government and presidential campaigning, but we are almost entirely ignorant of self-government and politics in the states. Our government and politics are carried on, as they must be in a federal system, on two levels, state and national. We have almost wholly neglected the implications of this dualism. The numerous monographs on various phases of state experience usually ignore federal relationships or use them in inverted fashion, implying that the federal was dominating the local, rather than using the reverse as the usually true perspective. Likewise, these local monographs too often are unrelated to local social and economic situations and are descriptive rather than analytic. More systematic and comprehensive coverage of state experience is necessary. The focus must be taken off Washington.

(3) **Administrative history.** One of the most significant phases of the history of American self-government is the development of administration. The growing complexity of American society has meant an increasing amount of administrative responsibility placed upon government, local and federal. Historians have shown an inclination to describe at length the history of the choice of officials, and then have neglected to examine what they have done after election, unless perchance they have been charged with fraud. We know too little of
the administrative continuity on the part of subordinates in the bureaus, who often shape policy making, too little of the history of the burgeoning of administrative activity as the governments, state and local, assume the new responsibilities charged to them by a constantly more complex society. Indeed, there is no more significant phase of political behavior than administrative functioning, and yet this great field lies almost wholly fallow with only political scientists showing much concern.

(4) Legislative history. In the field of the history of lawmaking and legislative procedure, in which there has been much greater interest, there have been significant omissions. It is very unfortunate, in the first place, that we have no adequate record of this fundamental process. The papers of the Continental Congress have never been properly catalogued, let alone published. There is no adequate record of Congressional debates prior to the 1830's. Worse still, for the important processes of colonial and state lawmaking, we are often without any record whatever save the skeleton account in legislative journals. In many cases the records are not wholly lost but are scattered and hidden in obscure newspaper files or in manuscripts in archives, historical societies, or in the rat-infested cellars and pigeon-splashed attics of state capitol. Likewise, much of legislative history is the story of committee-room treaties and lobby pressures of which the record is even more obscure and fragmentary. There is almost as much need for a legislative history as for one of administration.

(5) Neglected periods. There are neglected periods in American history as well as neglected processes. Not only has the colonial period been slighted, but other more recent chronological segments have been avoided. The period of the 1820's—the so-called but ludicrously named "Era of Good Feeling"—is one. The post-Reconstruction period, 1877-1890, is another, in which eastern Big Business, western Grangers, and the Mugwumps share the stage with Cleveland and Civil Service Reform to the exclusion of much else that was happening. It is debatable whether Populists and Progressives have received too much attention, but it is obvious that it is high time that more serious work is begun in the years since 1919. Many of the actors are still alive, data has been preserved in spotty quantity; but the telephone and airplane have been at work more devastatingly
than fire and rodents, precluding an adequate record. The problem must be faced.

(6) Government, politics, and society. Government and politics do not operate in a vacuum. They function in the midst of society as a whole. But who has given adequate study to the relation between government and people, to the action of social and cultural forces upon politics, and the action of politics upon social and cultural forces? There should be more study of the nexus between politics and ideas, of the political role of the intellectual, the reformer, the propagandist, of the manipulation of public opinion for or against government, of the emotional climate in which government must function.

(7) The location and exercise of power. 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?

(8) International significance of American politics. Finally, American scholars are apt to take the uniqueness of American political experience for granted to such an extent that they neglect to see it as part of a world experience. They neglect to relate American activity to similar and contrary trends elsewhere and thus lose track of its significance. This preoccupation with nationalistic concepts thus adds to American intellectual isolation and makes communication with other people difficult at a time when it is essential that international understanding among those attracted to democratic ideals be broadened and deepened.

In this period of ideological struggle in which a great contest for
power seems imminent, it is well to remember that social adjustment and the fundamental processes of competition and co-operation operate in significant part through the political behavior of men and women. Accurate knowledge of this behavior is more than ever essential. The history of American political democracy is still very much the historian's unfinished business.

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