The Problems of Writing Twentieth Century American Political History

A few years ago Professor Lesley Byrd Simpson of the University of California gave a delightful talk before the University’s Arts Club on the writing of history. The dissertation has now been privately printed for the pleasure and edification of Professor Simpson’s friends. A good deal of what he had to say seems germane to my distinctly formidable title.

“As I see it,” Professor Simpson declared, “... the artist supplies the motive power in the writing of history. His are the style, the excitement of creation, the experience of life, the immensely complex heritage of childhood and folkways, and the hardly less complex accumulation of long years of reading in non-professional literature. . . .”

In other words, the historian as an artist has to be a person of broad culture. And this carries with it, obviously, the assumption that the age in which he lives must afford him leisure for “the long years of non-professional literature.” He must know the great books. He must be familiar with philosophy and science. He must know his fellow men, the world in which he lives. Only thus will his understanding be profound and his interpretations as vivid and colorful as they are accurate.

But the age of swift communication and rapid reproduction—the age of the typewriter, the telephone, the radio and the multigraphing machine—has gone far toward abolishing leisure, if it has not killed it wholly. The printing press, it should be noted, does not share the blame. For printing, even with the linotype and swift rotary presses, has remained relatively expensive. True, cheap and worthless books are published in the twentieth century. They can, however, be ignored or swiftly appraised. They do not burden historical records unduly.

The villains which disturb the sleep of today’s historian are, first, the typewriter and the multigraph and, second, the telephone and the radio. The former two have packed millions upon millions of filing cases with tons of records of no value whatsoever. The latter two, in devilish contradiction, have prevented the recording of conversations upon which true interpretation of history depends. For how can the full story of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration be told without knowledge of the conversations which took place by telephone between the President, his Secretary of State, the other members of his Cabinet and his many advisers? Very rarely, as in the case of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, a stenographic transcript was kept. Far more often, the conversations were lost forever.

The first typewriter patent was granted in England in, somewhat surprisingly, 1714. But that machine of two centuries ago was an innocent and harmless one. It produced embossed writing for the blind. The earliest commercial typewriter seems to have been put on the market in the United States in 1874, and it was not long before the troubles of the twentieth century historian began. I realize, of course, that I am on controversial ground. The scholar who labors in the pre-type writer age will insist, and with some truth, that his own woes are the greater. Eyesight, he will contend, is in greater jeopardy from pages of illegible holograph, though few in number, than from a readable typescript. The argument, like many among historians, has small chance of settlement.

No doubt exists, however, that the typewriter very materially increased the number of letters, both written and received, in the files of twentieth century presidents, governors, members of Congress and other public servants. I have done little work in the files of President William McKinley, but I am under the impression that the typewritten manuscripts are not too burdensome. I speak from firsthand knowledge, on the other hand, of the Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft collections in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

Roosevelt can, I think, be called the first president of the type-writer age. He was a man of many virtues, but silence or economy in expression was not among them. He wrote and received, during his years in the White House, close to three quarters of a million
letters. And this collection does not include speeches, messages, memoranda or what came to be known, in the day of his equally communicative cousin of the same name, as directives. Roosevelt the First brought to a heightened perfection a technique which doubtless might be traced back through all the centuries of the written word. This was the dictation, made easier through shorthand and the typewriter, of what his daughter would call "posterity letters." The President, let us assume, had decided upon a certain course of action on some warmly debated issue. He had conferred on a given afternoon with a Congressional leader. The visitor gone, the President would summon one of the stenographers with which every administration is plentifully supplied.

"My dear Senator," he would then dictate, "as I said to you this afternoon, this is the policy of this government with respect to. . . ."

The letter would be mailed, in all probability. But the important thing was the filing of the carbon. Identical in general appearance to all the other carbon copies, the posterity letter waited quietly to trap the unwary historian. Of course, very possibly President Roosevelt actually did say precisely what he said he did. I have no wish for posthumous election to the Ananias Club. But how can the historian know whether he did or not?

If Roosevelt was the first president of the typewriter age, Taft was the second. The Library of Congress collection of his letters is even bigger than its collection of Roosevelt's. They include his years in the Philippines, as Secretary of War, as trouble shooter for the Roosevelt Administration at home and abroad, as President of the United States, as law professor at Yale and finally, the period of his greatest happiness, as Chief Justice of the United States. At least 1,000,000 letters are included in the Taft papers. Added to these are diaries numbering 15,000 pages of single-spaced typing. Those who first dug into the Taft files found, by the way, a pair of rubbers and a reel of motion picture film, dry and inflammable enough to have burned up most of the Manuscript Division. It may be doubted that Librarian Luther Evans or any of his staff is fully aware of the treasures and the perils which lurk in the closed file boxes.

The Roosevelt and Taft collections are almost microscopic compared with those of Franklin D. Roosevelt. George Washington, according to Dr. Allan Nevins, wrote between 20,000 and 25,000
letters. Our forefathers were far more casual in matters of correspondence. President Grant, for instance, kept few copies of his outgoing letters. The letters he received went promptly into the wastebasket unless they specifically interested him. But to date, literally miles of cabinets containing the Roosevelt correspondence have been deposited in the library at Hyde Park or are awaiting examination elsewhere.  

World War II brought about a flood of documents, staggering in size. The National Archives, it is estimated, has 700,000 cubic feet of papers which cover the whole history of the United States up to Pearl Harbor. After that, in the armed services and in the several federal agencies, 18,000,000 cubic feet more were accumulated. They came in from every war theater in the world. They bulge from the seams of warehouses all over the nation. The task of separating the important from the completely trivial looks almost hopeless. Yet it really isn’t hopeless. Early in the war a group of American historians realized that little was being done to digest the ever-increasing volume of documents, reports, and correspondence in the newly created war agencies and in the established branches of the government. Determined to do something about it, the historians won the support of President Roosevelt and of the late Harold D. Smith, Director of the Budget. A beneficial result was the appointment of historical officers in some forty agencies. They were instructed to set aside papers of real importance. In some cases they began work on actual histories.

I have no wish to be unduly critical; the work of these departmental historians has been of real value. But its quality depends, of course, on the degree to which they have been allowed access to material at the highest levels. Everyone will recall the times when the War Production Board, for instance, was torn by internal strife. The struggle between the armed services and the civilian production chiefs over critical materials did not end until V-J Day. Mistakes were made, very grave ones, on both sides.

The desire to bury the records of mistakes is innate in the human race, and particularly in that part of it which is transformed by the

pressures of war into a bureaucracy. At one period toward the close of the war, the Office of War Information was split into two groups on a question of basic policy. When the storm ended, through the inevitable compromise, OWI'S historical officer asked for the relevant records.

"The matter concerns the public in no way," he was curtly informed. "It has no place in any history of OWI."

But this carries no implication that a very great deal has not been done to pave the way for the ultimate, definitive political and military histories of the twentieth century. You are familiar, of course, with the remarkable study, *The United States at War*, which was prepared under the general supervision of Dr. Pendleton Herring, one of our speakers. It is no exaggeration to say that this is an astonishing document. Honest, thorough, and objective, *The United States at War* makes no attempt to gloss over errors. Had such a study been made of administrative methods in World War I, and had the lessons therein set forth been noted, billions of dollars might have been saved through improved methods in the struggle now ended. A number of scholars labored to produce *The United States at War*. In the preface it is observed:

... In their work on this book these men have participated in a new type of public reporting. They, of necessity, have written before all the evidence became available. On the other hand, they wrote before the data existing in the temper of the times and in the working environment of wartime administration were lost with the passage of the years. Working so soon after the event, they could not have the perspective which comes with time, but they had the advantage of current impressions created by the events with which they dealt; and they were able to capture some phases of wartime administration which would otherwise be lost. Torn between their interests in the technical aspects of administration and their mandate to produce an analysis of general interest, they have combined their efforts to turn out a volume which might have been designed differently had any single one of them been charged with sole responsibility.  

Other excellent histories based on "the data existing in the temper of the times" have already appeared. More may confidently be expected. No small courage was needed by Dr. William L. Langer of Harvard University when he decided to undertake *Our Vichy Gamble* and to argue in support of the American deal with the

notorious Darlan in North Africa. President James Phinney Baxter of Williams College put a prodigious amount of labor into his volume on wartime scientific miracles. Walter Millis has carefully analyzed the tragic events which led to the disaster of December 7, 1941. These are but a few of the books which refute the lament that it is impossible to write any history because of the overwhelming records. They are not final appraisals, but they are good ones. They are, of course, quite apart from the mounting stream of memoirs, to which I shall refer later.

The intricacies of the twentieth century make it quite impossible to separate political history from military, or either of them from foreign policy. One stretches nothing to point out that the repugnant negotiations with Darlan stem back to the refusals of Congress to prepare for war. The almost disastrous Battle of the Bulge was partly the result of the manner in which our ground forces were trained. Of peculiar interest to the twentieth century historian, then, is the huge project of the United States Army Historical Division. A total of ninety-nine volumes is in preparation. They cover every conceivable phase of the army’s part in the war. Most of them, but not all, will be of interest only to professional soldiers and to students of military history.

In both the army and the navy historical branches, officers were actively at work while the hostilities still went on and, to a more limited degree, they have been working ever since. Many of these officers were really civilians, some of them summoned from history classrooms into a modified form of military life which never failed slightly to astonish them. Some suffered frustrations which made the tribulations of working with graduate students seem but pleasant dreams of a vanished past. For many a commanding officer had no patience whatever with any form of history which did other than praise his wisdom, competence, and heroism.

The historical projects of the armed services have—and with reason—been regarded with deep suspicion in some circles. I must confess to sharing it. One day, at the Pentagon, I asked a young regular officer, a graduate of West Point assigned to the Historical Division after service abroad, to explain the army’s policy on objectivity. I

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7 Walter Millis, *This is Pearl!* (New York, 1947).
asked him to suppose that a historian, not connected with the army, requested a document reflecting discredit on some high-ranking officer.

"He wouldn't get it," my friend said flatly. "The army will not damage the reputation, or the public standing, of an officer on whom it might have to rely in the next crisis."

One is happy to note, however, that the first volume of the forthcoming ninety and nine is evidence that the army can tell the whole truth. This may be because the first book in the series is nonoperational. It deals solely with the training, administration, and organization of the ground forces in this country. Yet mistakes, serious ones, were also made on the home front. Dr. Kent Roberts Greenfield, formerly professor of history at Johns Hopkins and now the leading civilian in the Historical Division, is one of the authors of the book and does not ignore the mistakes. According to Hanson W. Baldwin, the military authority, the volume’s "objectivity is precise, its scholarship enormous, its details staggering."

This is encouraging. But any final judgment must await the treatment of highly controversial subjects such as, with respect to operations, the Battle of the Bulge and the crossing of the Rapido River. No faint shadow of an admission has yet come from any military source that the large casualties in either of these tragedies was due to error. If the ninety-nine volumes now in preparation are to be regarded as history, not whitewash, they must tell how our military leaders hopelessly failed to estimate what they needed when the Japanese struck. They must describe the inability to foresee the need of landing craft, which delayed all our offensives until the unopposed invasion of Japan. They must describe the bungling of the glider production program.

The twentieth century historian, seeking to separate truth from fiction, will find himself bewildered by the number of memoirs he must examine. He will regard them with scholarly distrust, of course. He realizes that an autobiography is in all probability a description of events, not as they really took place, but as the author wishes they had taken place. The historian will remember that Theodore Roosevelt, at the start of World War I, defended the rape of Belgium as inevitable when "giants are engaged in a death struggle." He
promptly forgot this, however, in his excoriations of Woodrow Wilson's neutrality.⁸

The precise historical value of the memoir is not easy to fix. Obviously, it can be very great. The author was, after all, a participant in the affairs about which he writes. Thus it will be impossible to ignore the forthcoming recollections of Winston Churchill. The biography of Harry L. Hopkins, now being completed by Robert Sherwood, will also be a basic source for the history of World War II. So are the recollections of Secretaries of State Cordell Hull and James F. Byrnes. General Dwight D. Eisenhower is also busy on a book. All these gentlemen were participants in great events. And each had access to highly confidential information. Yet each is also suspect. All of them are pleading causes—their own. But they have, at least, authority. How is the historian to judge a book like that by Elliott Roosevelt who, apparently without documentation of any kind, quoted his father's supposed statements regarding Generalissimo Stalin and other war leaders? And how can the hastily published diaries of Harold Butcher, naval aide to General Eisenhower, be appraised? A curious contradiction of the war was the blanket rule against diaries, always in danger of capture by the enemy, and the quasi-official permission granted the Supreme Commander's aide to compile exactly what was forbidden to others. The Butcher diaries make it clear to any careful reader that Captain Butcher had access, at least by word of mouth, to some extremely important documents. I refer to the minutes of the Washington, Quebec, Casablanca, Teheran and other conferences which are still classified as SECRET.

Nobody is going to blame the leaders of World War II for picking up a few dollars writing memoirs, even when they add up to several hundred thousands of dollars. The issue which baffles the twentieth century historian is the extent to which public men can suppress the publication of their papers. The argument on this has been long and heated. The courts have never finally ruled on whether a president may, when he leaves office, take with him all his papers, whether official or not, whether public or private. But the fact remains that many chief executives have done so. The papers of the Adamses, as Dr. Nevins has observed, are still unavailable to the impartial student. Nobody knows what really happened to the records of the

Warren G. Harding Administration. The probability is that they were burned.

The issue was squarely drawn in the debate over the Henry Morgenthau diaries. Mr. Morgenthau was fully aware that the telephone was robbing Clio of her birthright. So for twelve years he kept a stenographic record, not only of telephone conversations, but of the meetings and conferences he attended as Secretary of the Treasury. They now fill about 1,000 volumes of 500 pages each. It is niggardly and mean to raise the point that they were compiled while Mr. Morgenthau was on the public pay roll. None the less, they are in his possession. He can and does control their use. Clearly, the exact status of official papers needs testing in the courts.

The dilemma of the historian is a clear one. He is barred from some sources of inestimable importance. He finds it difficult to appraise and evaluate the ones to which he has access. The forthcoming collaboration of former Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, On Active Service, now appearing serially in the Ladies' Home Journal, will undoubtedly shed considerable light on the war. Yet the first installment also adds to the existing confusion. It appears that Mr. Stimson, as early as March, 1942, was calling for a European invasion.

"If Stimson or Marshall (General George C. Marshall) had been Commander-in-Chief," Mr. Bundy writes, "the invasion of France would in all probability have been launched in 1943, one year earlier than it actually occurred."

Elsewhere Mr. Bundy quotes Mr. Stimson as appealing to President Roosevelt not to permit the "rate of construction of landing barges . . . to lose the crisis of the World War." But the fact is that General Eisenhower was still worrying, in May, 1944, a month before the landings, over the deficiency in landing craft. Their construction had not been given a top priority until November, 1943. The ubiquitous DUKW, the two-and-a-half-ton army truck converted to amphibious use, was still in the planning stage, and rejected by the army's high command, while Mr. Stimson was urging the President not to let the lack of landing barges worry him. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the invading forces would have

been thrown back into the sea, a military disaster of the first magnitude, had those earlier judgments of the Secretary of War and the Chief of Staff prevailed.

But who is the historian, normally a nonpugnacious fellow who is ignorant of the arts of war, that he makes so bold as to criticize men of honor and probity? The historian is never even quite certain, because the twentieth century is the century of the press agent, of the authenticity of his material. It grows increasingly difficult to differentiate between a document and a blurb. Until twenty or thirty years ago, the press agent was more or less restricted to Broadway and the circus. Today he is well-nigh universal. He serves politicians, debutantes, business, finance, science—even the Supreme Court now has a marshal who interprets court rulings for the benefit of the press.

Except on Broadway, press agents no longer so call themselves, of course. In the army they are Public Information Officers. In civil life they are Public Relations Counsels or Directors of Public Information. Often they are disguised, in industry, as Assistants to the President or Executive Vice-Presidents. They flourished during the war, of course. Every government and agency had its quota. Their job was to present the bureau’s activities in the brightest possible colors. And their products, all too often, have been filed away as history.

Among their duties was ghostwriting. It is a reasonable assumption that Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address. Woodrow Wilson was really the author of his important messages. But that day has long passed, as the confused historian well knows. The origin of that ringing phrase in President Roosevelt’s first inaugural—“the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”—is for the moment wholly lost. Quite possibly, Mr. Roosevelt composed it himself.

Another obstacle confronting the historian of the twentieth century lies in the security regulations imposed by the armed services and several of the civilian war agencies. During the war, rightly enough in most cases, documents were classified as CONFIDENTIAL, SECRET, and TOP SECRET. General Eisenhower, as Chief of Staff, has announced the relaxing of these regulations with respect to many historical sources. But the minutes of the conferences at which Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin made world history, for good or for ill, are still classified. I have no doubt whatever that thousands of
other vital documents are also suppressed. It would be very interesting, for example, to demand inspection of the Army Air Forces intelligence reports just prior to the German break-through in December, 1944. These reports gave clear warning of heavy troop concentrations.

The armed services security regulations seem to depend wholly on who is doing the writing. Captain Butcher, in his diaries, published classified material. So does former Secretary Stimson in his current *Ladies’ Home Journal* serial. So did Ralph Ingersoll in his inflammatory *Top Secret*. Colonel Robert S. Allen stated openly, when working on his history of the Third Army, that he had no intention of obeying the security regulations. He had been an intelligence officer on the staff of the late General George S. Patton. He had accumulated a vast amount of material and he used what he pleased. I am glad to note that no action has been taken against Colonel Allen.

All in all, however, the inaccuracies of memoirs, the too-friendly official histories, and the security regulations are minor handicaps. The main problem remains the bulk, the staggering and overwhelming bulk, of the material in the twentieth century. Dr. Vannevar Bush, who did such distinguished work in the Office of Scientific Research and Development during the war, has squarely faced the problem. Libraries, he has said, are wholly out of date.

“Our ineptitude in getting at the record,” Dr. Bush argues, “is largely caused by the artificiality of systems of indexing.”

So the learned doctor has devised a machine which he calls a Memex. In this gadget the individual “stores all his books, records and communications” which have been reduced to a fraction of their size through the use of microfilm. Within the Memex are filed all the books the scholar may conceivably need, all the documents, all the newspapers, all the manuscripts and all the notes. By pressing levers and buttons he can see the ones he wants projected on screens. The scholar can insert 5,000 new pages of material a day and still not fill the repository of the Memex for hundreds of years.

Such, at least, is the promise of Dr. Bush. As yet, the Memex

exists only in his fertile imagination. But the vision, while holding a promise of relief to the twentieth century historian, is not without dread possibilities too. The almost equally mysterious business machines, which accomplish all kinds of miracles through punched cards, have been known to get out of order. The case will be recalled of the cranberry grower in New Jersey who was expecting a $150 crop subsidy check from the government and received, instead, one for $150,000,000. Picture our historian at his Memex. He is at work, let us suppose, on a monograph in which he is trying to prove that Calvin Coolidge, having announced that he did not “choose to run,” died a disappointed, embittered man. Our scholar presses the button which should bring forth all the infinite, lexicographic meanings of the word “choose.” But to his consternation bells ring, gears grind, and all the world’s knowledge on Byzantine art is flashed before his eyes.

Or possibly he is quietly electrocuted.

Washington, D. C.

Henry F. Pringle

Writing History Under Fire

In the floor discussion which followed Mr. Pringle’s paper, the difficult problem of securing data on the war history still held as confidential was considered from a variety of angles. Much concern was expressed lest some of this material be kept unavailable for an indefinite time or be shown only to a favored few. In reply it was pointed out that this cloture was to some extent exaggerated. It was apparent that questions of national security and personal reputation were complex and puzzling. However, the remarkable fact was stressed that the war record has been made and preserved in a fashion never before dreamed possible, that historical work of a high order has been begun even in the midst of the conflict, and that there is every prospect that there will emerge a history of the war on a scale and of a quality which ten years ago would have been declared impossible. It was reported that in the gathering of material on Pennsylvania’s part in the war, The Historical Society has already played a notable part, and the Society was further urged to do its full share in making possible an adequate history of the Commonwealth in the twentieth century.

* Synopsis of discussion of Mr. Pringle’s paper.