"Second Thoughts and Suggestions"

"In this day of increased problems of government, it seems to me supremely important that historians make the best contribution they are able to make to their fellowmen struggling with the problem of the organization of political power. Government must do new and fearful things that are beyond the comprehension of most voters. In our capacity as voters, few of us can do more than help choose men wiser and perchance better than we are to represent us in struggling with these problems. It seems to follow that we need to know as much as possible about the various democratic procedures of choosing political leaders. Reason tells us something about these things; experience is our other chief guide, and the historian might be regarded as the custodian of humanity's experience. Would it not therefore be useful for us to know more than we now know about the history of suffrage requirements, of what goes on on election day, of party organization, of nominating devices, and of the effects of one-party, two-party, and multi-party situations at various times and places in American history? Thus we might be able better to appraise and perhaps improve our current practices in respect to choosing political leaders.

"There is also need of more study in the history of the activities and scope of government—local, state, and national—throughout American history. This study would be a combination of constitutional history and public finance. It should tell what each kind of government did at various periods of history; of the rising cost of government and of the increasing variety of government services; of the transfer of a given activity from one level of government to another (usually from the smaller to the more general). For many years we have been moving from minimum government toward maximum government, and I think a study narrowed down to this one great trend would be extremely useful.

"Now to the question of what needs to be done. To speak in ideal terms, I wish there could be a large and well co-ordinated attack upon this problem somewhat like the current attack upon the mili-
tary history of the past war. This military history program is costing large sums of money; an adequate program of political study would likewise be expensive, but surely, it is as important in the long run for us to know how to govern ourselves as it is to know how we won the recent great war.

“As for organization, I would suggest a central and well-staffed office with contacts with major graduate schools where a good deal of the work might be done. Among the preliminary activities would be the preparation of a bibliography of studies already made bearing on the questions under consideration. In the second place, a list should be prepared of historians who are interested in this kind of history and who are willing to work at it.

“Looking somewhat further ahead, I think that studies need to be made of sample counties, cities, and states, emphasizing especially the administration of government, the location of political power, and procedures by which men rise to power. Of course all this needs to be done on an historical basis; it ought not to be restricted to a study of contemporary practices.”

—Charles S. Sydnor

“Particularly important was the warning that writing of history can become, in the hands of even the most ‘scientific’ historians, a mere wayward antiquarianism. Was this not in essence the emphasis of what most of you were contending for?”

—Carl Bridenbaugh

“The trouble is, perhaps, that we never seemed to agree as to what constitutes our ‘new political history.’ Most of us would certainly refuse to go along with Mr. Herring, if by the ‘new history’ he meant a history that has relevance only for our immediate contemporary problems and that is slanted to serve certain interests or ideologies. In the discussion Mr. Herring seemed to retreat from this extreme position considerably and ended up where most of us would be willing to stand. My conclusion was, therefore, that we all more or less agreed that in so far as it was possible and within the bounds of honest scholarship we would like to see the ‘new history’ have meaning for our present problems. . . .
"I am inclined to think that we do indeed have a new political history, and that for the past fifteen years at least an increasing number of scholars in our field have demonstrated that it is not only possible for the political historian to take account of the contributions of the other disciplines, but that he can be something of a literary artist as well."

—Arthur S. Link

"Never have I witnessed so searching an analysis of the premises that a group of speakers had laid down in their addresses by those of the audience. What we had was really a series of super-round-tables. The procedure adopted of providing each individual with copies of the papers was a particularly happy one. If an approximation of historical truth can be gained, I do not know of any other plan than the one carried out by the Society that holds out any prospect of producing equal results. By results I do not mean that all members of the Conference were brought to a uniformity of view, but, rather, were brought without exception, it seems to me, to a realization of the enormous difficulties facing any writer of political history who proceeds confidently on his way without weighing all of the implications of his manner of approaching the task.

“Our Historical Society has magnificent resources which should be utilized much more than they are. . . . I know of no better way to help to give the Society the important place that it should occupy in our historical fraternity than by continuing, if possible, such conferences.

“The newer foundations, such as those of the Huntington and the Clements, have tended to divert the attention of students from the wealth of materials contained in the older foundations. Among these, and of course without reference to the Library of Congress, I would, without hesitation, place The Historical Society of Pennsylvania as first. I believe that I have worked in them all and I therefore know whereof I speak."

—Lawrence Henry Gipson