

## HISTORIOGRAPHY AS PEDAGOGY: THOUGHTS ABOUT THE MESSY PAST AND WHY WE SHOULDN'T CLEAN IT UP

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Historiography is vital to our teaching about the past and to our understanding of the present, though you would not always know as much from the practices of K-16 history educators.<sup>1</sup> When I began my first full-time position as a college history teacher, in Wooster, Ohio, in the fall of 1990, a well-meaning colleague gave me some advice: "Avoid historiography like the plague," he said, adding that students just did not care about the changing views and perspectives of historians over time. Rather than avoiding historiography "like the plague," though, I have ended up making it the foundation of my teaching over the years. I teach a graduate course dedicated solely to the historiography of the American West. But beyond that specialized class offering, historiographical contexts serve as a backdrop for all of my courses, graduate and undergraduate, including the second half of the introductory U.S. survey.<sup>2</sup> If you want students to understand the dynamism and the relevance of the past, then you have to let them know that the past is and always has been the subject of debate, not just for politicians and historians, but for all people who want to understand their world.

I try to illuminate contemporary issues by emphasizing how scholars have viewed historical trends and events differently at different moments in time. This is historiography—the history of historical writing and thinking. Or, to offer a more vital explanation: Historiography is the study of the dynamic past, a past that is always messy, ever changing, never resolved, and always relevant to the present. The past is contested terrain and the historiographer is the explorer of that interpretive battlefield. Unless we can get students to understand the messy and exciting truth about history,

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was originally delivered as a keynote address at the Jefferson County, Colorado, Teaching American History Institute, June 12, 2007. I offer my sincerest thanks to Cynthia Stout and Brian Loney at the Jefferson County School District and to Patricia Limerick at the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado, Boulder, for inviting me to participate in this excellent partnership between the schools and the academy. This essay retains much of the informal tone of the original presentation. Earlier versions of the portion of the essay on the Civil War as a moral lodestone appeared as "War in Modern America," in Steven M. Gillon and Cathy D. Matson, *The American Experiment: A History of the United States, Volume II: Since 1865* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 1308-09; and "About Donald Rumsfeld's Comparison of Iraq and the Civil War," History News Network, May 24, 2004: <http://hnn.us/articles/5199.html>.

<sup>2</sup>This interest in incorporating historiography into the introductory U.S. survey prompted me to write four short "Competing Interpretations" essays for Gillon and Matson, *The American Experiment*: "The West and America," 694-95, "The Age of Reform," 846-47, "The Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, Jr.," 1182-83, and "War in Modern America," 1308-09.

they are in danger of subscribing to stereotypes that pervade public understanding of the discipline.

Historiography should be central to our teaching, but for it to become so we need to overcome some serious barriers to the development of a historiographical consciousness. America loves history. This is a sweeping statement, I know, but there seems to be a good deal of evidence to support it. Americans flock to historical sites such as Colonial Williamsburg, where they can view the past "just as it was." Chautauqua performances and other historical reenactments also provide us an opportunity to view the past in exact replica. The History Channel garners reassuringly high viewer ratings, and these ratings are, I think, evidence of public interest in history. In the twenty-one years that I lived in England, no one ever asked me what earlier period I wished I could live in. But in America the question is asked surprisingly often, as evidence again, I would suggest, that the American public is interested in the past.

However, Colonial Williamsburg, Chautauqua, the History Channel, the desire to "visit" an earlier age in real time, or virtually or vicariously, these can all be examples of the dead past, of history, as well ... "history," unless there is careful attention paid to the past's contested nature and its pertinence to the present. The past gets exciting, it becomes contested, and it comes to life when we think historiographically. Some tour guides at Colonial Williamsburg still get uncomfortable when visitors ask about slavery in the region. The happy colonial past gets messy, and that is when it becomes really interesting. That is when we learn from it.

But for that historiographical breakthrough to occur, we need to exorcise some commonly committed cardinal sins against the dynamic past. (My Catholic childhood is surely surfacing here.) It is not just a problem in the classroom that we have to address. These transgressions against the dynamic past are committed all the time, even in everyday conversation, and their very ubiquity constitutes a challenge to our efforts to make history meaningful to our audiences. In short, an ahistorical or even anti-historical consciousness pervades American popular culture, perhaps no more so than in previous eras, but it is certainly with us in full force today.

We commonly use the phrase "that's history" in reference to the general unimportance of an event that has passed. Old boyfriends or girlfriends become "history," mere footnotes in romantic journals; professional sports teams that fail to make the playoffs are "history" as soon as the playoffs begin; when former Secretaries of Defense, such as the quite recently departed Donald Rumsfeld, leave office, they become "history" in the fleetest of moments. What is more, in addition to the misuse of "history," there is a deep tendency in the American vernacular to flatten all history into one long distant past through use of the seemingly ever more popular phrase "back in the day." When one hears colleagues using this phrase in the history hallways, one fears that the struggle to revive and maintain a dynamic past is lost. The phrase, of course, means absolutely nothing and everything—yesterday, last week, a year ago, five years, a decade, a generation, a lifetime—that is all just "back in the day."

Moreover, the health and vitality of that dynamic past we try to make our students so aware of is further endangered by the great tendency among talk show hosts, political commentators, and others, including our own students on occasion, to pronounce with great certainty that there are "two sides to every story." If there were just two sides to every story, our work as historians would, of course, have been wrapped up a long time ago. There are, as we all know, many sides or perspectives that make up the dynamic past, yet, even with this knowledge, the proclivity for pronouncing that "hindsight is 20/20 vision" is still rather too evident in popular culture and, regrettably, even in our classrooms. Once, in a graduate historiography course, one of my students confidently informed the group that "Hindsight is 20/20 vision." I was reminded in that painful moment that our lives on this earth might well be just a test. If hindsight were 20/20 vision, I patiently explained to the student, there would be no historiography—historians would just see the light after a while and would all agree. Historians, though, often disagree with each other and with other groups. Just ask professional historians who argued in 1994 and 1995 with World War II veterans over the Smithsonian Institution's proposed exhibit on Hiroshima and Nagasaki if they think "hindsight is 20/20 vision."

The last of the five cardinal sins against the dynamic past is the enormously popular notion that "history repeats itself." Who among us, on that exciting first day of class when we try to introduce students to the dynamism of our discipline, has not had to respond to a supremely self-confident assertion from a student that history repeats itself? But unless one can provide clear examples of how exactly the same things ever happened again as a result of exactly the same sets of circumstances, one has to conclude that history does not really repeat itself and if it did then we would just need to figure out the cycle and then those of us who correctly determined what had happened the first time around could just place bets on what would happen the next time. There can be no serious historiographical consciousness if history repeats itself.

So, back in the day, when there were two sides to every story, when hindsight was 20/20 vision, and when history repeated itself, the discipline of history was awfully dull. This was the era in which we connected the dots, marching through time from monarch to monarch, president to president, decade to decade, suggesting an inevitable and incontestable unfolding of events. This is not history—it is torture. When students say they find history boring, what they are saying is that they find the way we make the past neat and tidy to be boring.

The past is exciting because it is an ongoing story with ever-changing plotlines and endings. The past is the storehouse of information that we all use—individuals and groups, liberals and conservatives, the religiously minded and the agnostic and atheistic, young and old, men and women of all cultural groups—to make our favored arguments about how we got to this point and where we ought to go from here. Moreover, the past is intellectually challenging. It is the consciousness of a messy past that makes us wiser, and perhaps gives us the urge to clean up after ourselves. But while there are plenty of things in America worth cleaning up, the very last thing we

want to do as historians is sweep away the messiness of the past itself. The clean-cut past of the average history textbook, of the all too common semester or year-long march through time, leaves our students cold because it leaves them with no roles in the process other than those of “rememberer” and “regurgitator.”

Of course, there are things that our students need to know, things that we need to teach them, knowledge that might serve as a kind of cultural glue to bind us together as a society, knowledge that state-level history and social science standards require educators to test. But if we give students just one finished product, one march through time, a single chronicle of the development of a nation or civilization, then we can expect no more than that they will become expert regurgitators of the same model. They will not become historians, just tellers of a story that they have already been told. They will be like builders who can construct only a single house. They will not be creators, designers, or thinkers, and because of that they will have a particularly difficult time becoming historians.

So, when a student says, with an air of great confidence and wisdom, “there are two sides to every story,” or “history repeats itself,” or “hindsight is 20/20 vision,” inform them that they are wrong, wrong, wrong! I know this is hard to do in the kinds of nurturing classroom environments that we like to create, environments in which students are never wrong, but always somewhere on the right track, moving at their own special pace towards the right answer. But no, in this case tell them that their train is heading in the wrong direction. Indeed, it is not only going the wrong way, but it has been derailed. In fact, tell them that the railroad bridge that spans the gap between their present intellectual state and their potential future state of intellectual edification has just collapsed under the enormous weight of their wrongness.

But even better, I would suggest, than telling a student that he or she is wrong—and, to be honest, I am Mr. Empathy in the classroom, a weak chastiser of students—give students examples of the dynamism of the messy past and the benefit of developing a historiographical consciousness. Here is one example. On May 13, 2004, Elisabeth Bumiller, in an article in the *New York Times* titled “Stolid Rumsfeld Soldiers On, But Weighs Ability to Serve,” focused on the hard-working former Defense Secretary burying himself in the tasks of his office while besieged by calls for his resignation and finding solace in the “lessons of history.” The article includes a description of Rumsfeld’s closing comment at a three-hour long appearance before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense:

I’ve been reading a book about the Civil War and Ulysses S. Grant [the book, by the way, is Jean Edward Smith’s biography, *Grant*]—and I’m not going to compare the two, don’t get me wrong, don’t anybody rush off and say he doesn’t get the difference between Iraq and the Civil War. The fact of the matter is, the casualties were high, the same kinds of concerns that we’re expressing here were expressed then. [The people then] were

despairing, they were hopeful, they were concerned, they were combative ... the carnage was horrendous, and it was worth it.<sup>3</sup>

Powerful words to be sure, and now four years later Donald Rumsfeld is gone and the number of Americans who believe it is "worth it" has declined considerably. The administration briefly discussed the possibility of creating a new cabinet position, that of War Tsar, forgetting perhaps that this role has traditionally fallen to the Commander in Chief and that the word Tsar does suggest something of a departure from the democratic traditions our President wishes to impart to the Iraqi people. But while Rumsfeld's words were certainly memorable, the sentiment he expressed will not appear new to those familiar with the late Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s famous *Partisan Review* article from October 1949, "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism." In the article Schlesinger argued that the Civil War was a war that had to be fought to purge the nation of the evil of slavery, just as World War II had to be fought to eradicate the evil of Fascism, and just as the United States in 1949 had to wage the Cold War to combat the evil of Communism.<sup>4</sup>

But let us jump back a little further into historical and historiographical time and then return to Schlesinger's article. America entered World War I in 1917 inspired by Woodrow Wilson's professed goal of making the world "safe for democracy." Even the famous pragmatist and educational theorist John Dewey, who previously had been thoroughly opposed to American entry, was convinced by Wilson's idealism. Dewey, following Wilson's lead, essentially instructed America to jump into the river and direct its flow toward Progressive ends, claiming that the war had created "instrumentalities for enforcing the public interest in all the agencies of production and exchange."<sup>5</sup> But Dewey's former student Randolph Bourne offered a prophetic warning in response to Progressive intellectuals' enthusiasm for war: "If the war is too strong for you to prevent, how is it going to be weak enough for you to control and mould to your liberal purposes?" Bourne insisted that democratic ends could never be achieved through

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<sup>3</sup>Elisabeth Bumiller, "Stolid Rumsfeld Soldiers On, But Weighs Ability to Serve," *New York Times*, May 13, 2004.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review*, 16 (October 1949): 969-81.

<sup>5</sup>John Dewey, "The Social Possibilities of War," 551-60, in Joseph Ratner, ed., *Characters and Events: Popular Essays in Social and Political Philosophy by John Dewey*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), II, quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 50.

undemocratic means, and he turned out to be partly right.<sup>6</sup> The United States helped the Allies win the war, but Wilson's efforts to direct the flow of the peace negotiations at Versailles were idealistic, courageous, and wrong-headed all at the same time, and, ultimately, proved unsuccessful. The harsh peace—which forced upon Germany \$33B in reparations payments and an admission of full responsibility for the conflict (the “war guilt clause”)—was a lamentable legacy of the war, to add to the millions and millions of dead and wounded soldiers. The world had not been made safe for democracy.

The gap between expectations and outcomes nurtured disillusionment in America. During the 1920s, journalists, politicians, cultural critics, and some historians began to blame bankers and munitions makers for leading the country into a war it should have avoided. In *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), Charles and Mary Beard placed the bulk of the blame for the war on the rise of industrial capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Then, in the 1930s, the rise of fascism in Europe, along with Japanese aggression in Asia, seemed to prompt an increasingly isolationist attitude in the United States—a desire to avoid circumstances that might lead the nation into another war. In the anxious and isolationist climate of the Depression years, American historians downplayed slavery as the cause of the Civil War. They often paralleled the Great War with America's own bitter fratricidal conflict, viewing both as events the nation should have avoided. These Civil War “revisionists,” as they came to be known, more commonly placed the blame for the war on hotheaded abolitionists in the North and proslavery spokesmen in the South who irresponsibly led their respective sections into war. Even as the ominous winds of the Second World War were brewing, Avery Craven made this argument in his book *The Repressible Conflict* (1939). And James G. Randall, in *Lincoln the President* (1945), joined Craven in downplaying slavery as the key factor behind the Civil War.<sup>8</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., however, joined historian, literary critic, and novelist Bernard DeVoto on the other side of a bitter war of words. DeVoto's stinging criticisms of the Civil War revisionists appeared in his *Harper's Easy Chair* editorials in February and March 1946. The first volume of Allen Nevin's eight-volume magnum opus, *The Ordeal of the Union*, was published in 1947 (the last in 1971) and emphasized that the “problem of slavery” was at the center of cultural differences that

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<sup>6</sup>Carl Resek, ed., *War and the Intellectuals: Essays by Randolph S. Bourne, 1915-1919* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), cited in Kennedy, *Over Here*, 52.

<sup>7</sup>Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

<sup>8</sup>Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939); James G. Randall, *Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg*, 4 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1945-1955). These volumes and the whole mid-twentieth century debate over the causes of the Civil War receive excellent, albeit opinionated discussion in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 444-54.

precipitated the conflict between the North and South.<sup>9</sup> Schlesinger's 1949 article was a direct indictment of the "revisionists" for removing slavery from the equation and included the memorable lines: "To say there 'should' have been no abolitionists in America before the Civil War is about as sensible as to say that there 'should' have been no anti-Nazis in the nineteen-thirties or that there 'should' be no anti-Communists today."<sup>10</sup>

Schlesinger's words are rather more eloquent than those of the former Defense Secretary, though Rumsfeld's remarks were extemporaneous, while Schlesinger's words were carefully crafted. But the sentiment is remarkably similar. Schlesinger's recounting of the historiographical skirmish of the late 1940s further fleshes out the parallel with Rumsfeld. Schlesinger wrote in his autobiography, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950* (2000): "The Civil War seemed to present almost as stark a clash of irreconcilable ideologies as the war against Nazism."<sup>11</sup>

Historians of American ideas will recognize in this historiographical debate the shift in American thought from moral relativism to moral absolutism in the period from the end of World War I to the late 1940s. Moral relativists held that truth was relative, not absolute, and that there was no such thing as definitive, incontrovertible right or wrong, good or evil—the disillusionment of the post-World War I era had shaken intellectuals' faith in absolutes. But by the early 1930s the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had "rediscovered sin" in his book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), and developed his ideas in his later works, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (2 volumes, 1941 and 1943) and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944). Niebuhr wrote that humans were inherently sinful, that evil existed in the world, and if history was a march towards progress, then it was a very messy one with lots of stumbling backwards along the way.<sup>12</sup>

Those who doubted the existence of sin in human society only had to look to the horrors of Nazi genocide and the rise of totalitarianism. The Civil War increasingly came to be viewed not as an avoidable tragedy but as a vital crusade against evil.

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<sup>9</sup>Allan Nevins, *The Ordeal of the Civil War*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947). Nevins' eight-volume history is available in a four-volume reprint version (New York: Collier books, 1992). For further discussion of DeVoto's and Nevins' contributions to the battle against Civil War revisionism, see Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the Twentieth Century*, 444-54.

<sup>10</sup>Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War," *ibid.*, 447-48.

<sup>11</sup>Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the Twentieth Century*, 448.

<sup>12</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941-1945), and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).

Fascism and later Communism (in the late 1940s) were paralleled with slavery; all three came to be viewed as cancerous growths that had to be rooted out for the good of humanity. Think of how often the term "slavery" was used in the nation's Cold War rhetoric in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The term was utilized to describe conditions in the Soviet Union and to describe what life might become in the United States if Americans did not remain vigilant. President Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, contended that Harry Truman's Cold War strategy of "containment" had been not only insufficient, but also malign, because it accepted the existence of Communism and sought only to prevent its spread. Dulles argued that America needed to adopt a strategy of "liberation and rollback," to rollback the Communist tide and liberate people living under the Communist yoke. Those oppressed by Communism would be freed by American policy, Dulles argued, and it was quite easy to infer that he was invoking the policy of liberation and rollback as a great moral crusade in the tradition of American abolitionism a century earlier.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, as the civil rights movement entered a new phase of direct political action in the mid 1950s after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the gap between the nation's Cold War rhetoric of securing freedoms for other peoples around the globe and the reality of its own violations of the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of black Americans at home became more apparent, as Mary Dzubziak's excellent study *Cold War Civil Rights* demonstrates.<sup>14</sup>

A moral high ground was established through paralleling World War II with the struggle against slavery and later paralleling the Cold War with that struggle. It was this very same hallowed moral ground that Rumsfeld invoked in reference to the war in Iraq, though references to that moral high ground seem to have largely slipped out of the administration's later rhetoric. The American Civil War is no longer a moral marker in the administration's defense of the Iraq war, in large part because much of Iraq seems to have itself devolved into a state of actual civil war. The parallels of Vietnam, however, have increased, though it is worth noting that with respect to the scale of losses on the part of the U.S. military and the population of the occupied nation that what is happening in Iraq more than five years after the war began is more akin to what played out during the occupation of the Philippines just over a century ago.

But the key point to consider, whether one supports the current war or not, is that, as historians, we draw on current events to reassess the past. The past generally

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<sup>13</sup>For an excellent and brief analysis of John Foster Dulles's moralistic and absolutist foreign policy rhetoric, see David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 389-96; for fuller coverage, see Townsend Hoopes' biography, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1973), and Richard H. Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Pity, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999).

<sup>14</sup>Mary Dzubziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).



does not become more clear and incontestable as we uncover more concrete evidence. On the contrary, our landscapes of the past are reconfigured by the powerful events of the present. The current occupation of Iraq will inform our understanding of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine occupation ("Remember the Maine, to Hell with Spain," 9/11, the War on Terror, Weapons of Mass Destruction, the invasion of Iraq—a touch of historical *déjà vu*?), the Vietnam War, and other conflicts, too, perhaps even the Civil War. What is clear is that the Civil War has become, for historians (and for policymakers) a moral lodestone, one that is used to buttress arguments concerning the validity, necessity, and morality of the nation's involvement in other wars throughout the twentieth and now the twenty-first century. This single historiographical strand alone can help students make some sense of the chronology of modern American history and also find parallels and departures, continuity and change, in the nation's various wartime experiences. American historians and policymakers have conveniently downplayed slavery in general, and, more specifically, slavery as a cause of the Civil War, when it has been in their interests to do so. But there have been other times when the Civil War has been viewed as a righteous crusade against sin that justified other crusades, such as World War II and the Cold War.

We can benefit in our teaching by acknowledging that historiography is history. Historians' divergent interpretations of the past, offered at various times in the past, can be used as primary sources to better inform us about the cultural climates of the past and how the climate of the present has developed out of them. We rediscover the past every time we read a work of historical scholarship written in an earlier era. We should ask "What does this source tell us, not just about the events it covers, but about the time in which it was created?" The context of World War II, the rise and demise of Fascism, and the onset of the Cold War help explain why Schlesinger, Jr. wrote his essay on "The Causes of the Civil War" far more than the discovery of any new evidence does. It was not the discovery of new historical facts, but the reconsideration of which pieces to include in a thoroughly reconstructed picture of the past, that characterized this historiographical shift. By teaching students about these connections, they learn about the causes of the Civil War and about the cultural climates of the post-WW I and post-WW II eras, and about the use of the past by politicians and historians in the present.

It is a messy and dynamic story that we need to tell, but a compelling one, and a better story than the kinds we tell when we clean up history, when we make it neat and tidy, when we standardize and sterilize the past, when we artificially connect all the dots, thereby injecting an air of inevitability into the story and forget that history is in constant dialog with the present, when we make the past, well ... "history." Marching through time is dull, and students are never shy about reminding history instructors of that fact. But when we step off the clear and sterile path of straight historical narrative into the murky, contested, and deeply relevant landscapes of historiography, we enter a past that has meaning for all students of history. This historiographical past is one that better mirrors the messiness of the present and serves as a truly meaningful, albeit complicated, guide to human endeavor in the present and future.