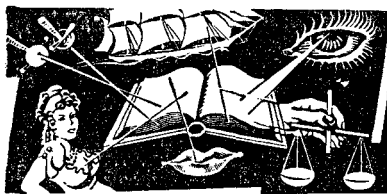

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AMERICAN POLITICAL MYTHS RE-EXAMINED

by BEN RAY REDMAN

HISTORY is never written, but remains always in the writing, for in history, as elsewhere, the search for truth is unending. It has often been said that every generation must write history according to its own lights, but this is not quite accurate. History is not written by generations, but by the individual members of a vast company of historians; a company which never ceases to replenish its ranks with inquiring spirits, and which never ceases to subject the near and distant past to fresh scrutiny. The books of history that really matter are highly personal productions, compounded in each instance of a unique blend of knowledge, intelligence, philosophy, temperament and art.

Of course, there are fashions in history; there are innovations and trends. Every originating historian who provides a useful key to human action is sure to find followers, whether his key is divine will, physical geography, race, evolutionary prog-

ress, economic determinism, challenge and response, or psychoanalysis. But apart from these fashions and trends—and often within them—the rewriting of history is a continuous business.

The accumulation of unquestionable facts, even in a narrowly limited area, is never complete; the frontiers of interpretation are never sealed against adventurous minds. Indeed, fact and interpretation are often indistinguishable, for facts are of all degrees of tangibility and demonstrability. An action, let us say, has been performed on a certain date: this is a fact of which we are sure. But what of the reasons behind the action? Are they less factual than the deed itself? And the consequences of the action, which it is the business of the historian to establish and measure in importance—are they any less factual than their cause?

That Benedict Arnold betrayed his country at a known time and place is a known fact, for example, but when we come to the motives behind that betrayal knowledge is less assured and interpretation is free to range within the limits of probability. Was Arnold's

treason rooted in a childhood experience, in wartime frustration — or in what soil? That Henry VIII was passionately determined to marry Anne Boleyn is a matter of record, but who shall say just how much influence that determination exerted on the course of the Protestant Reformation? Or, to enter a field of more violent controversy, who shall say with certainty whether the Reformation was a good thing or a bad thing for the Western world? Was Tiberius a monster of depravity or an upright Roman of the old republican school? He has been pictured as both. Did Emperor Charles V, after his abdication, continue to be an active force in European affairs, while pulling strings from his cloistered retreat; or were his thoughts piously fixed upon another world? Questions like these, both great and small — and their kind is numberless — remain always open. Interpretations, born of facts, come and go like summer flies; and truth is what is agreed on at any given moment.

Fashion in history provokes revolt, theory invites disproof, blunt assertion begets blunt contradiction, and exaggeration is answered by counter-exaggeration. Much of the rewriting of history, particularly on the popular level, is nothing more than the replacement of one erroneous simplification by a contradictory simplification no less misleading. Chapters that have been written in pitch are boldly rewritten in whitewash. The proud are cast down and the humble exalted.

The debunker treads on the heels of the hero-worshipper, to ply his trade with an eager eye for every fault and blindness for every virtue. The wise historian, however, refuses to simplify. Recognizing the infinite complexity of truth, of human events and human character, he accepts this complexity, grapples with it, and, within his chosen area, tries to come as close as possible to what really happened, what made things happen, and what those happenings meant — without ever claiming that he has spoken the last word.

It is this kind of wisdom that in large measure informs Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* [\$4, Knopf], a volume which must bear the responsibility for having evoked the above reflections on history in general. This book contains underlying assumptions and implied conclusions with which I profoundly disagree; but one may reject these assumptions and conclusions and still find oneself left with a remarkably penetrating, informative and stimulating historical-biographical study.

II

In his attempt to define the nature of our main political tradition, and examine the careers of its makers, Mr. Hofstadter has walked in familiar ways and explored well-trodden ground, and almost everywhere — among statesmen who are household names and events that every school-boy knows — he has met popular

myths and widely cherished misconceptions. He has dealt with these myths and vulgar errors with sobriety and precision, marshaling evidence and arguments based on a wide and close study of pertinent material, and animated by an independent, incisive intelligence. The result is an old story told with novel stresses and fresh meanings; a gallery of related portraits, in which all the faces are basically familiar, but often partially strange because of unfamiliarly accented features.

The figures in Mr. Hofstadter's gallery include the Constitution-makers, Jefferson, Jackson, Calhoun, Lincoln, Wendell Phillips, Cleveland, Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt; and in most instances the portrait varies more or less markedly from the likeness which has been sanctified in our schoolrooms and broadcast by our popular histories and biographies.

The Constitution-makers are depicted much as Charles Beard painted them in his famous, influential *Economic Interpretation*: as men of property who were intent upon defending and preserving their property, who believed that government must be based on property (since men of no property "lack the necessary stake in an orderly society to make stable or reliable citizens"), who profoundly feared the advance of democracy, but who were: till correct in thinking of themselves as "moderate republicans."

Jefferson's reputation as a militant,

crusading reformer is shown to be largely undeserved by a man who "hated vigorous controversy, shrank from asserting his principles when they would excite the anger of colleagues and neighbors," expressed his "generous and emancipating thoughts" almost exclusively "in his *private* correspondence," and, after writing the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, "avoided expressing his more unacceptable ideas in public." Mr. Hofstadter stresses the fact that Jeffersonian democracy rested on an unfortunately narrow, agrarian base, since its founder believed that dependable virtue resided only in farmers, while cities were to him the pestilential abodes of corrupt merchants, workers, and speculators.

In reaction to Hamilton's use of governmental power for the benefit of capital, Jefferson instituted a Federal laissez-faire policy which was to become a cardinal tenet of our political tradition. The man who had said, "Let our workshops remain in Europe," lived to believe in the development of American manufactures, to encourage by his own Embargo Act the rise of the industrialism he had so greatly feared, and to see his dream of a commonwealth of honest husbandmen stultified by the consequences of the Napoleonic wars. By the end of 1816,

Jefferson's party had taken over the whole complex of Federalist policies — manufactures, bank, tariffs, army, navy, and all — and this under the administration

of Jefferson's friend, neighbor, and political heir, James Madison. As Josiah Quincy complained, the Republicans had "out-Federalized Federalism."

In the case of Jackson, Mr. Hofstadter alters the conventional picture by emphasizing several points: Jackson thought of himself, as he rose in the world, not as a democratic frontiersman but as a southwestern aristocrat; he was more avid of wealth and martial glory than of political power; when debtors clashed with creditors in Tennessee, he stood with the moneyed men; his emergence as a democratic leader was paradoxical and largely accidental; his election did not signalize a victory for either the frontier or economic reform; "the Jacksonian movement was a phase in the expansion of democracy, but it is too little appreciated that it was also a phase in the expansion of liberated capitalism."

The Jacksonian leaders were no radical levelers. Their philosophy was one with that of the Jeffersonians: "to take the grip of government-granted privileges off the natural economic order." In his war against privilege, Jackson extirpated Biddle's Bank of the United States, but in so doing he gave an open field to the wildcat speculators and inflationists whom he detested no less than he did Federally favored bankers. It was under Jackson, in a rapidly expanding economy, that the American system of free-for-all competition, with few holds barred, began to enjoy a really vigorous growth.

Ignoring the Presidents of small stature who came between Jackson and Lincoln, Mr. Hofstadter turns his attention to a minority spokesman of force and originality, but a peripheral figure as regards the body of our political tradition: John C. Calhoun. Here again the lights and shadows are arranged with effective unconventionality. The advocate of state sovereignty, nullification and the concurrent majority, is shown as an ardent nationalist and a devoted Unionist. "What he wanted was not for the South to leave the Union, but to dominate it."

Mr. Hofstadter refuses to agree with the historians who find in Calhoun "the supreme champion of minority rights and interests everywhere," and insists that, although his formulation of majority-minority relations may be of enduring value, "he was not interested in any minority that was not a propertied minority." The most interesting feature of this chapter, however, is the juxtaposition of Calhoun and Karl Marx, and the demonstration that the American at least roughly anticipated the German in a number of conceptions, such as the class struggle, the perennial exploitation of labor, the tendency of capital towards concentration, the theory of surplus value, and the drive towards social revolution. "The difference was that Calhoun proposed that no revolution should be allowed to take place." But he feared it was imminent. "Marx out of optimism and Calhoun

out of pessimism both overestimated the revolutionary capacities of the working class."

III

The largely discredited figure of Calhoun is followed, in *The American Political Tradition*, by the idolized figure of Lincoln, who is dealt with in a well-reasoned chapter that will astonish many innocents and infuriate many idolaters. Here Mr. Hofstadter comes to grips with an American myth of the first magnitude, a sacred myth, and he does not shrink from the crucial encounter.

"The clue to much that is vital in Lincoln's thought and character," he declares, "lies in the fact that he was thoroughly and completely the politician, by preference and by training. It is difficult to think of any man of comparable stature whose life was so fully absorbed into his political being." He was a devoted, orthodox Whig; a zealous party worker; a "deliberate and responsible" opportunist; and a campaigner who knew how to straddle an issue when votes were at stake — how to say one thing in Chicago and something quite different in Charleston. Only a master of political strategy and manipulation could have held together the heterogeneous, discordant elements which composed the Republican party; only a master politician, acting on the level of statecraft, would so skilfully have maneuvered the South into the position of aggressor. And behind these abilities there was a mighty

drive. Lincoln's ambition, said Herndon, "was a little engine that knew no rest."

History has cast Lincoln in the rôle of the Great Emancipator, but it was not a part that he was eager to play. He uttered his first public denunciation of slavery when he was 45. In 1854 he declared that his "own feelings" would "not admit" the possibility of Negroes being the political and social equals of whites. One of the reasons for his nomination in 1860 was that he was considered safer than Seward on the slavery question. Upon becoming President, he put his weight behind a constitutional amendment which would have made slavery secure from Federal interference. When, during the war, Frémont sought to free Missouri slaves, and General Hunter ordered freedom for the slaves of Georgia, Florida and South Carolina, Lincoln countermanded their proclamations. But finally the pressure of events became too much for him, and he was forced by political and military considerations to issue his own famous proclamation, which, writes Mr. Hofstadter, had "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading," and which "did not in fact free any slaves," as, apart from its propaganda value, "it added nothing to what Congress had already done in the Confiscation Act."

But if Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator of myth, there is no doubt that he displayed rare qualities of character during his Presidential years. His "rage for personal success"

was stilled in the White House. "Is it possible," asks Mr. Hofstadter, "to recall anyone else in modern history who could exercise so much power and yet feel so slightly the private corruption that goes with it? Here, perhaps, is the best measure of Lincoln's personal eminence in the human calendar — that he was chastened and not intoxicated by power."

Wendell Phillips stands apart from the rest of Mr. Hofstadter's company; indeed it is hard to believe that he belongs in it at all. But the chapter which traces his transformation from a mere crusader into "a moralist with a philosophy of history" is interesting for its own sake. Cleveland is presented as a fine flower of the Gilded Age, in which industrialists, or their apologists, quoted Darwin and Herbert Spencer to their purpose, and politics took its moral tone from business. He "was a taxpayer's dream, the ideal bourgeois statesman of his time: out of heartfelt conviction he gave to the interests what many a lesser politician might have sold them for a price." Bryan is portrayed not as the rebel of his reputation, but as a steadfast party man who was intent upon preserving "classic American individualism"; and one who ended as he began — "a provincial politician following a provincial populace in provincial prejudices."

IV

Mr. Hofstadter's last four chapters are devoted to the architects of the Square Deal, the New Freedom and

the New Deal; and to Herbert Hoover, who had the stubbornness and courage to believe that if the American people would only play the game according to old rules they could put an end to a bad run of cards. In the cases of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the emphasis is on their basic conservatism rather than on superficial innovations and reforms. Moving from a position "well to the right of such liberal capitalists as Abram S. Hewitt and Mark Hanna," Roosevelt declared himself for economic as well as political democracy, and finally took over the progressive movement much as he "took" Panama. The springs of his action were not moral nor ideological, but strictly political. No less political was the sound and fury of his trust-busting; an activity which Taft took seriously, to the horror of many a good Rooseveltian. Perhaps the best evidence of his sincerity or insincerity lies in the fact that, as a progressive action were not moral or ideological, backing from such strongholds of liberalism as the House of Morgan and United States Steel.

Wilson, according to Mr. Hofstadter, was "essentially a spokesman of the past," who, even when he discarded the laissez-faire philosophy, "proposed that the force of the State be used to *restore* pristine American ideals, not to strike out sharply in a new direction." Yet the biographer-historian does not deny that within the traditional economic frame of action Wilson was remarkably ef-

fective, that his first term of office was distinguished by a body of positive legislation unmatched since the days of Hamilton. War came to halt his domestic program, and reaction followed war; but for this he can hardly be blamed.

Mr. Hoover is painted in a style that has already become conventional: as an able administrator, devoid of political gifts, and as the die-hard defender of a largely unregulated profit system, who was helpless in a situation he could not understand; but who was still the first President to attempt leadership in a depression. He was ruined, we are told, by the fact that, "Almost overnight his essential beliefs had become outlandish and unintelligible" — a statement to which I shall return.

"Hoover had lacked motion," says Mr. Hofstadter, "Roosevelt lacked direction." This sentence may be taken as the key to a study of Franklin Roosevelt which agrees in general, and in many particulars, with the view of him presented in this department, in *End of an Era* (September 1948). He lacked direction, but in motion he was indefatigable. He was an improviser without long-range vision, but he never ran out of short-range expedients. He changed his mind as easily as his necktie, and was often of the opinion of the last speaker. When he entered office in the midst of a banking crisis, he was asked if he favored deposit insurance, and he replied that he did not; he denounced as "a cruel joke" the

Hoover farm program, which he was to push to the limit; he condemned Federal deficits, and came to accept deficit financing as a permanent practice; his attack on monopoly was a repudiation of his NRA policy; he entered office as a proponent of the matured-economy theory, and, when war had brought Americans full employment, he happily announced that ours was an expanding economy, which would require "new facilities, new plants, new equipment — capable of hiring millions of men."

Roosevelt's alliance with the left, Mr. Hofstadter points out, was a political maneuver calculated to steal Huey Long's thunder, and also designed to annoy groups and persons who were annoying FDR. His arguments carried him to the brink of socialism, "But the New Deal was designed for a capitalistic economy that, as Miss Perkins says, Roosevelt took as much for granted as he did his family. For success in attaining his stated goals of prosperity and distributive justice he was fundamentally dependent upon restoring the health of capitalism." Of course, he did not succeed; but domestic failure was engulfed, and almost obliterated, by war.

V

The sum of Mr. Hofstadter's studies is the demonstration that there is a very definite American political tradition, the main tenets of which have been steadfastly held by American leaders from Jefferson to Hoover, and

by the vast majority of our citizens for more than a century. The area of agreement shared by our contending major parties has been vast in comparison with their areas of disagreement. Our tradition is founded squarely upon the rights of property and individual effort; on the belief that self-help is the best help; that success is the fair reward of ability and industry; and that economic self-interest, hedged by a necessary minimum of legal restraints, and as free as justice permits from Federal interference, is capable of producing a satisfactory and equitable society.

When Mr. Hofstadter lists the items of Hoover's faith — "efficiency, enterprise, opportunity, individualism, substantial laissez-faire, personal success, material welfare" — he is, as he says, enumerating articles of the dominant American creed; articles of faith common to Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson. No historian could have better proved the continuity of our political tradition. But behind this proof are assumptions, and mingled with it are implications and conclusions, that are gravely questionable.

While tracing so successfully the enduring character of the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian philosophy, the author makes it plain that he considers this endurance due to "inflexibility of mind" rather than "steadfastness of faith"; and the gist of his thought regarding the tradition to which he has devoted his book is that this tradition is unusable in our present

circumstances and unadapted to our future needs. In his introduction he writes:

Although it has been said repeatedly that we need a new conception of the world to replace the ideology of self-help, free enterprise, competition, and beneficent cupidity upon which Americans have been nourished since the foundation of the Republic, no new conceptions of comparable strength have taken root and no statesman with a great mass following has arisen to propound them.

Even Franklin Roosevelt's contribution was negative, not positive: he sapped the strength of old structures, but provided no practicable new blueprints.

Mr. Hofstadter's cast of mind is most clearly revealed, however, in the statement that Mr. Hoover's essential beliefs became outlandish and unintelligible almost overnight. Name over to yourself those items of belief, and then ask yourself — and Mr. Hofstadter — what kind of nation or society it would be in which efficiency, enterprise, opportunity, individualism, personal success and material welfare were outlandish and unintelligible. (I have omitted "substantial laissez-faire" from the list, because "substantial" is an indefinite adjective in this context.) Material welfare is, as I understand it, the prime and avowed aim of almost all social theorizing, planning and reform; and it is hard to see how even a social-service state could happily dispense with efficiency, or with a certain amount of individual enterprise,

or how its citizens could enjoy any sense of human dignity without simultaneously enjoying some sense of personal success.

There is today a highly vocal school of thinkers dedicated to the proposition that a social system which is not perfect in every part should be destroyed root and branch, dynamo and cog. It is, I believe, a dangerous school. Our system is not perfect, and it is being seriously challenged by new conditions, but it has proved itself capable of continual adjustment and improvement, and the argument that its potentialities are exhausted is no more than a rash theory. But, cry the all-or-nothing perfectionists, it has failed miserably!

Well . . . as I write these words

on a Labor Day weekend, the radio informs me that 100 million Americans are crowding our roads in some 30 million automobiles. This is, of course, a grossly material fact, but I cannot believe that it is a negligible one in measuring the success or failure of our economic system, or the vitality of our tradition of self-help; and I must repeat that it is on material, not spiritual grounds, that the American tradition stands condemned in the eyes of social radicals and iconoclasts. Perhaps the perfectionists will insist that there should be 150 million Americans in 45 million automobiles. And perhaps there should be. I see no reason to object to these figures as a goal — if the road-builders keep pace with the motorists, and if some of us are allowed to stay at home.

SONG

BY JANE MORRISON

Tomorrow's melody may come in tatters,
One dissonant chord.
The voice of yesterday says nothing matters,
Not heart, not sword.

But now is music's strength, now is its climax;
Make memory strong,
Inviolable, not the pallid beauty time sacks:
Today is song.