

# BOOK REVIEWS

The author of these sparkling essays (republished, but rewritten) is much more partisan than most other historians think proper. Whereas they see partisanship as a danger to be guarded against and try to prevent their politics from dictating their conclusions, Schlesinger sees no reason why an intelligent person like himself should suppress his political wisdom when he sits down to write history. Everything he says of the past has immediate reference to a recent or present-day partisan controversy, and the reader is never left in suspense as to what that connection might be. For a person of his intelligence, he has the least ironical of minds.

Schlesinger wears his liberal heart on his sleeve, and under his sleeve he uses his elbow to seek out abrasive contact with his Republican and conservative opponents. He has an instinct, not for the jugular but for the sore point (Nixon, Agnew, and Watergate), as if his intent were to cause maximum irritation to his opponents without running the risk of inadvertently killing them. For Schlesinger without his enemies would be without his life. Even the partisan—especially he—needs his opponents; and he needs them precisely for the sake of his partisanship. This is the unintended irony of Schlesinger's book, whose title is taken from his essay on the liberal and conservative cycles of American history.

When a historian speaks of cycles in history, he seems to step back from the partisanship of the moment and to look at it in the perspective of the whole. Indeed, if cycles are meant literally as circular returns to the beginning, the historian who speaks of them admits the relative insignificance of history, since in this view nothing historical would be lasting. At the least it would seem that partisan victories and defeats would lose their clarity, and that both triumph and despair would begin to blur. But not for Schlesinger. He uses the cycles to relieve his present suffering, nothing more. Because of them, he knows that his fellow-liberals will rise again, maybe soon. It does occur to him that thereafter they must fall again, but he draws no conclusions from this. His belief in cycles does not amount to a generous admission that his partisanship is not

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## THE PARTISAN HISTORIAN

### THE CYCLES OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr./Houghton Mifflin/\$22.95

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always appropriate, much less that he is wrong 50 percent of the time. It merely tells him why he wins only 50 percent of the time.

In Schlesinger's version, the cycles of American history alternate between "public purpose" (the liberals) and "private interest" (conservatives). But he also takes note of the obvious tension in today's conservatism between the economic conservatives who want to get government off our backs and the evangelical moralists who want (he says) to put government into our beds. Are not the latter inspired by public purpose, though misguided according to him? When it comes to foreign policy Schlesinger recognizes cycles of "extrovert" and "introvert" concern that do not quite correspond with the domestic cycles. Why not? And why is devotion to interest selfish in domestic politics but prudent in foreign affairs, while devotion to principle is noble and just at home but overbearing and officious abroad? Perhaps this question

can be answered, but only by finding the virtues and vices of both interest and principle. Schlesinger does this when he wants to explain the morality of following the national interest but not when he wants to denounce the immorality of following private interest. Yet at the end of this essay, sensing this difficulty, he says that "the two jostling strains in American thought . . . are indispensable partners in the great adventure of democracy." If so, then why prefer one to the other? Why not accommodate to the time—either by listening with the wind or by adopting the policy of the Trimmer (as Lord Halifax explained it) of leaning *against* the wind? Why the heedless pursuit of partisan half-truth?

Perhaps partisans are needed, and their characteristic exaggerations should be tolerated, because they stand for principle instead of accommodation. In that case one should give conservatives their due and admit that private interest becomes a public pur-

pose when a party is willing to lose by maintaining the cause of private interest. But Schlesinger the partisan cannot bring himself to do this. To keep his spirits up, he needs to show that he does not take his opponents seriously. Ronald Reagan and his supporters are just as wrong now as they were in their previous incarnations. This is the elevated view gained from Schlesinger's historical perspective.

The other main theme of the book attempts to state that meaning of America which does not operate in a cycle. Here we have a constant alternative (as opposed to a periodic alternation) between America as experiment (good) and as destiny (bad). The former is the project of the Founding Fathers, who were "realists committed, in defiance of history and theology, to a monumental gamble." The latter is self-righteous Calvinism convinced of its own godliness and divine election as a chosen people—a belief that "remains strong" in our day, Schlesinger adds ominously. We sense immediately that just as the cycle is intended to explain and contain self-interested conservatism, so this distinction has the Moral Majority for its target. Surely Schlesinger is correct to stress the difference between the Puritans and the secularism of the Founding Fathers, but to do so he understates the revolutionism of the American experiment, which was intended to be an experiment in self-government *on behalf of mankind*. America was understood to be leading a cause in the world, the cause of republicanism newly defined and greatly improved in the Constitution. To lead this cause is not to try to impose one's will on the rest of the world, as the French revolutionaries did and Communists continue to do, but it does give us a "standard maxim," in Lincoln's phrase, superior to that of other nations, in the opinion of the Founding Fathers.

Although this maxim is not derived from prophecy, it may be made compatible with Providence "with malice toward none, with charity for all," as Lincoln showed in his Second Inaugural Address. Even the cool reasoners of *The Federalist* did not forget to acknowledge a debt to Providence for advantages in the making of the American experiment that could not have been gained merely by the exercise of cool reason. Schlesinger, however, relies on Reinhold Niebuhr to



assure himself that religion is nothing but a danger to liberty. Although he opposes totalitarian regimes, it does not seem to have penetrated to the intelligence encased in his thick liberal skull that these regimes have all been officially and zealously atheistic. It is therefore completely beyond his power to perceive that the confidence in progress which was originally American and has reappeared frequently in American "progressives" is in our day to be found most strikingly in Reagan and in his fundamentalist supporters, and hardly at all in liberals like Schlesinger.

Schlesinger's loss of confidence is on view in his chapter, "Why the Cold War?" In his younger days a "Cold War liberal" if there ever was one, he now seems to be revising his opinions in response to the revisionist historians who have put the blame for the Cold War on the United States. Schlesinger repeatedly attacks these historians for attempting to describe the Cold War as a conflict of interests between traditional states. On the contrary, he says

it is a clash of ideas between a messianic totalitarian state and a capitalist democracy. But this promising criticism leads him to conclude merely that assessment of blame for the Cold War is irrelevant. His indignation at the amorality of interests quails before his belief in the relativity of moral ideas. His liberalism is full of blame but silent on its own behalf. It is for "public purpose"—but which?

Schlesinger's partisan history is a refreshing change from the bloodless objectivity of many of his fellow-historians, and this book can be recommended for both its plain talk and its style. Schlesinger shows himself open to instruction from minds greater than his own, if they belong to the dead; and he reproves the vanity of historians who think they know better than the participants what the issues were. But on the whole one cannot recommend that his example be followed. If it were, we should have his shrillness without his felicity, his unfairness without his sophistication, and his vacant liberalism without his liveliness. □

#### WHY WE LOST THE ERA

Jane J. Mansbridge/University of Chicago Press/\$9.95 paper

#### WHY ERA FAILED: POLITICS, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, AND THE AMENDING PROCESS OF THE CONSTITUTION

Mary Frances Berry/Indiana University Press/\$17.95

Fred Barnes

Prior to last November's election, polls showed that a state equal rights amendment was all but certain to be ratified by the voters of Vermont. Nothing shocking in that, right? Vermont is a state that's a lot more liberal than its Republican tradition would lead you to believe. Liberal Democrats routinely win there nowadays (governor, senator), and a self-described socialist is the mayor of the state's largest city, the People's Republic of Burlington. Feminists were poised to stage their first big celebration since Walter Mondale knuckled under to the National Organization for Women and named Geraldine Ferraro as his Democratic vice presidential running mate. Surprise, surprise. The amendment lost, in an election year that otherwise gave conservatives practically nothing to cheer about.

There's an old lesson, freshly told, in the Vermont result: polls about equal rights amendments lie. And they've been lying for years. In 1975, polls showed that a majority favored state

ERA's in New York and New Jersey. But 57 percent voted against an amendment in New York and 51 percent voted no in New Jersey. Three years later in Florida, polls showed an equal rights amendment would win voter approval by two-to-one. It lost two-to-one. In 1980 in Iowa, a pre-election poll found that a state ERA was favored by 48 to 23 percent. On election day, it failed by 55 to 45 percent. In Maine in 1984, support for a state ERA was pegged at 62 percent in a poll taken one month before the election. But it turned out that 63 percent voted against the amendment. What happened in Vermont, then, should have been no surprise at all. It was part of a trend.

If you're following the drift, the next step shouldn't be too hard. When the national ERA was up for ratification by the states, the average poll result showed it was backed 57 to 32 percent, seemingly a rock solid majority. There was no national referendum, but it's now safe to say that the amendment wasn't really that popular. And this helps explain why the ERA failed to become the twenty-seventh amendment to the Constitution. Jane Mansbridge,

an associate professor of political science and sociology at Northwestern University, writes that polls largely measure the support for an abstraction called "equal rights for women." Americans like the idea of equal rights. But the state referenda have measured something further—whether voters truly want to change women's role in this country. The answer is no. You have here what historian John Lukacs characterizes as a distinction between public opinion and popular sentiment. Public opinion is the formal, high-toned stuff. Sentiment is what people really feel. In a crunch, sentiment is what prevails.

Knocking down the myth of the ERA's overwhelming popularity is only one of the brave tasks that Mansbridge takes on in *Why We Lost the ERA*. It is an extraordinarily honest and insightful book, all the more so because Mansbridge is a feminist and a fervent backer of the ERA. The test for me of a political writer is the willingness to make tough, critical judgments about a politician or an issue that the writer supports. When Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. finds fault with President Reagan, that's no big deal. I'm waiting for a critical word about some Kennedy. Anyway, Mansbridge passes the test. She likes the ERA, but that doesn't bias her analysis. I'm only sorry that some readers may pass up her book to read Mary Frances Berry's on the same subject. Berry, a professor of history and law at Howard University, is well known as a liberal noisemaker on the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. *Why ERA Failed* is better than you

might expect from Berry—its history of the ratification process is useful—but Mansbridge's book is far superior. Mansbridge offers a fair and subtle account of why the ERA went by the boards, without the hysterical conservative-bashing that marks most feminist screeds on the matter.

Mansbridge denigrates neither the arguments nor the motives of opponents of the ERA. The strategy of the amendment's advocates was to talk highmindedly about equal rights, push the amendment through 38 states, and let the Supreme Court decide what it would mean in real life. For well-grounded reasons, Mansbridge writes, opponents were leery of leaving the issue in the hands of judges. "If 'equal protection' could mean busing white children to black neighborhoods, if 'due process' could bar punishing people who everyone agreed had committed serious crimes, and if the 'penumbra' of the Bill of Rights gave women a right to abortions, one did not have to be a certifiable paranoid to suppose that guaranteeing men and women 'equality of rights under the law' might turn out also to have substantive consequences that legislators who supported the Amendment had not anticipated and that many of them would have opposed," she says. "... It seemed, then, that the ERA would give the Court another set of words to work with." Conservatives didn't have to be male chauvinist ogres or housewives of the Marabel Morgan school to want to avoid that.

Even Phyllis Schlafly, the leader of the anti-amendment forces, gets respectful treatment from Mansbridge. "The Amendment would have been ratified by 1975 or 1976 had it not been for Phyllis Schlafly's early and effective effort to organize potential opponents," she writes. Schlafly shrewdly moved the argument from one over equal rights to one centered on the practical effects the amendment might have, such as requiring combat duty by women and weakening the family. "Once opponents turned public attention to the Amendment's effects, they were already well on their way to winning," Mansbridge says. "Their exaggerations, while incurring some costs in credibility, succeeded in making the substantive effects of the Amendment a central issue in the debate." That was enough. "Because the amendment process requires a near consensus, the opponents had only to create enough doubt about the Amendment to prevent a consensus from forming." Without Schlafly's intervention, the consensus would have formed.

Mansbridge tosses out an interesting vignette that certainly matches my experience. She found Schlafly to be very accessible. It took one phone call for



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